True North

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True North

by HANNIBRAT (moderndaylestat)

Summary

Will’s life is perfectly balanced between two anchors. On one side, there is Jack and the criminal profiling work, on the other side, there is Hannibal’s unorthodox lifestyle and what it allows Will to be. Being the FBI’s most gifted and simultaneously FBI’s most wanted is the art he has mastered over time. The equilibrium is disrupted when a new FBI profiler with empathy skills on par with Will’s joins the Behavioural Science Unit.

In the meantime, a series of flashbacks from the past tells the story of Will finding his true north in blood, murder and of course, Hannibal.

Notes

Hello! a month or so ago i fell head over heels in love with Hannibal and it inspired me to write this story. I haven't written anything in like 7 years so i may be out of practice but here we go regardless.

I felt that the TV show barely scratched the surface of exploring Will's dark side and what it means to him. This story is about his journey of self-discovery, redefining his morality and making peace with who he really is. It's set in season 2, following the canon events up to Randall Tier and diverging from there.

Comments and feedback would be greatly appreciated!!

North

Will stands idly by the trees, early spring sun warm on his face, while the rest of the team finish packing up at the crime scene. Apart from the gruesomeness marked by the striped tape, the park has a peaceful atmosphere, and he cannot help getting lost in his thoughts. It has been exactly two years since he was released from Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Some things have stayed the same. He still teaches at the academy, consults on murder cases, goes on fishing trips with Jack. Some things have changed. For example, it has been a while since he assisted with a case where he *doesn't* know who the killer is.

After his time at the psychiatric facility, Will tried his hardest to adjust back into his old life as if nothing had changed. It was only later that it ended up saturated with careful deception. He had started seeing a psychiatrist, Dr Faucheux (but she insists that he call her Claire), to show Jack and everyone else that he is stable enough to be back in the field. Claire is a recent graduate, not been practising long enough to develop that sick perversion to pick apart Will's mind under the disguise of 'professional curiosity'. With her, it is very simple. He talks about his insomnia and nightmares from the field. She prescribes Temazepam to help him sleep. He picks up the bottles from the pharmacy and empties them down the drain.

He has to keep his head clear all the time, any drug in his system would sabotage his hyper-heightened empathy and remarkable imagination. Will needs these abilities to do his job at the crime scenes, both before and after it is discovered by the FBI. However, he knows that it would keep Jack at peace if he maintained the appearance of a man who has his mental stability under control. He needs his position at the FBI just as much as they need him. He needs to use his extraordinary abilities for good and help people. The job also comes with certain other benefits, and he is willing to engage in all this play-pretend to keep them.

He does not feel bad about it. The world is full of play-pretend after all. The law enforcement and court systems act like the embodiment of justice and fairness, but he had learned the hard way that this is not always the case. His incarceration showed just how blindly people believed in the infallibility of evidence, no matter how much he screamed and pleaded that he was innocent. Good men end up behind bars simply because the judge decides so, swayed by the carefully cherry-picked bits of evidence, arranged to tell a specific story. There is no real justice in the world. Even after the exoneration, even after two years, it still hurts. His moral compass used to be a reliable way to navigate the world, but now the world has changed in his eyes, and the needle of the compass is wavering, taking longer than usual to point north.

It is really no surprise that he ends up with Hannibal, the man who follows his own set of rules, his own moral compass, defying everything the society has taught him about the right and wrong. Almost everyone around them thinks their relationship is unconventional, not just because of their sexuality, but because Will is dating his former psychiatrist ("He is not and never was my psychiatrist", Will has to repeat for the millionth time). In Jack and Alana's opinion it is also unconventional because of Will's attempt on Hannibal's life. Of course, they have no way of knowing that it was Hannibal who had pinned the serial killer label on Will and sent him to prison. It is only fair that Will sent someone to kill him in retaliation. They

are even. When questioned by Alana and Jack, Hannibal explains that Will was not in his right mind and did it out of desperation due to what he thought was unrequited love. “If I could understand and forgive him, you can too”, he had said to them.

It was not a lie; they have moved past all sour feelings related to that incident. Will has no sour feelings about Randall Tier either. He was a gift from Hannibal. By letting Will take Randall’s life, Hannibal gifted Will the key to the first of the many locks in his own mind, built to keep a certain part of him restrained.

There is no more manipulation between them. No more mind games. Just two men with the ability to see right through each other, the merciless and the virtuous, the hedonistic and the self-sacrificing. Unlocking the parts that each has kept buried for so long and embracing them. Hannibal holding the key to Will’s violent desires and Will holding the key to Hannibal’s compassion and love. A perfect balance, neither being able to be truly defined without the other.

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Will visits Hannibal again the day after he brought Randall’s corpse to Hannibal’s kitchen. He moves around the psychiatrist’s office like a raging storm, pulling books from the shelves and throwing them on the floor, kicking the extravagant furniture, cursing and yelling at Hannibal. Normally, Hannibal would not tolerate such appalling behaviour from anyone. Then again, he did not think anyone would confront him with the truth about the Chesapeake Ripper in the way Will did.

“You killed all those people”, Will shouts, kicking Hannibal’s desk with such force that the ink bottle at the edge of it tumbles over, splashing over the books scattered on the floor, “And you ate them!”

“That is quite an accusation. Are you here to interrogate me on behalf of the FBI?” Hannibal enquires, maintaining perfect composure. He scrunches up his nose in disappointment at the sight of Alexandre Dumas’s ‘ The Three Musketeers *’ that is now drenched in black ink.*

“No.”

“Very well”, Hannibal nods, “I can see that you are angry. May I ask why?”

“You really have no idea, do you?” Will scoffs, voice dripping with sarcasm. He snatches a few sheets of paper from the desk, presumably the notes Hannibal wrote during their meetings regarding his psychological wellbeing. He rips them in half, imagining it is the man’s face he is doing it to. The mental image of it is quite satisfying, but not enough.

“Are you angry because I killed innocent people, Will? Because they did not deserve to die?”

“Yes.”

“Or are you angry because I took advantage of your mental state and no one saw the truth?”

“That too.”

“You have every right to resent me for those reasons. But that is not the anger you are expressing towards me right now. This is not the reason you are trying to punish me by destroying my belongings”, Hannibal points out.

Will pauses and turns to look at him, raising his chin in opposition.

“Are you angry at yourself?”

“Don’t you dare try to feed me your manipulatory bullshit again”, Will hisses, hurling a book at Hannibal. He revels in the shock that flashes through the man’s eyes as he narrowly manages to dodge the impact. Hannibal’s composure is back in a split second.

“Tell me what it is that angers you so much then.”

“You’ve done horrible and gruesome things. Things people wouldn’t wish upon their worst enemies. Yeah, I’m fucking angry about it. You want to know why? I’m angry because you don’t feel the slightest hint of guilt about it. What you did to those poor people doesn’t bother you at all. How do you live with yourself?”

Hannibal tilts his head to the side with curiosity, urging the other man to continue.

“It’s easy for you because you’ve got no morals. But you can’t drag me into this sick and twisted world of yours, force me to kill and expect me to not resist it.”

Will’s chest is rising and falling heavily from rage, physical exertion and something else that Hannibal cannot quite pinpoint. He meets Will’s eyes, studying them intently.

“I never said this journey of self-discovery that I set you on would be easy, Will. It will require inner conflicts and great sacrif-”

“I’m not a fucking monster”, Will snaps, cutting him short, “I am not like you.”

“Then what are you?”

“A man who knows murdering people is wrong”, Will spits out, but the words lack the same conviction that he had just moments earlier.

“Did it feel wrong when you murdered Garrett Jacob Hobbs? Or Randall Tier?”, Hannibal muses. He is probing around, trying to locate the weakest spot in the armour of righteousness that Will is so proudly wearing.

“That’s different. They deserved it.”

“You told me yourself that killing bad men felt good, Will. You are angry because I have accepted myself as I am, while you are still struggling to.”

The statement rings through Will's ears, deafening, as if someone had shot a gun right next to his head. Yet it feels like the bullet found the way deep into his chest. Hannibal has picked his entry point well and pierced right through the armour, shattering it into pieces. Will had walked into his office holding onto his virtuous nature with pride, so confident that it made him a better man than Hannibal. And the man has stripped it off him, leaving him to face the truth that was trying so hard to hide from himself.

Will shakes his head in defeat, mentally beating himself up for thinking it would be a good idea to resume his therapy with Hannibal. He feels cornered and vulnerable. Yet somehow inexplicably, he feels free.

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"Hey, Will, you got a minute?" Jack rips him out of his thoughts, passing him in the hallway at the academy. He is accompanied by a woman he does not recognise. She is short and lean, shoulder-length brunette hair pinned back, leaving her sharp and attentive cinnamon-brown eyes unobstructed. Upon closer inspection, Will does not see a visitor tag anywhere on her clothes.

"I'd like to introduce you to special agent Penelope Rivas. She will be joining our team."

Will pulls his face into a friendly expression and holds out his hand for a handshake, as he introduces himself.

"Pleasure to meet you, Will Graham", Penelope replies, with a knowing look in her eyes. She has probably read everything Tattlecrime has to offer on his tragic life story. Will hates it.

"You'll be working on the cases together seeing that you have similar skill sets", Jack continues.

"Yeah? What's your expertise? I'm the resident criminal profiler on Jack's team." Will suddenly feels the need to assert his territory. The *only* criminal profiler on Jack's team, he wants to add. The FBI's finest. There is no one out there with a 'similar skill set' to his.

"Criminal profiling too. Sounds like you've got room for one more, judging by the number of killers roaming loose in the area."

Penelope goes on to talk about how she is an old acquaintance of Jack's and that she relocated from Arizona, wanting to live somewhere with colder weather, but Will has stopped listening. He cannot believe Jack has done this. Why did he feel the need to hire another person to do the job Will is already doing? This is Will's domain, and his only. And he does a spectacular job at it. Cases do not get left unsolved and killers uncaught, the Chesapeake Ripper and Will's own masterpieces being the only exceptions. It is only natural that certain killers would be a 'challenge' to Will. He cannot be *too* good at his job after all.

“I’ll be happy to show you the ropes, agent Rivas”, Will says, offering just enough of a smile where it meets the social standard of politeness. Beneath that, he is infuriated.

North-Northeast

Chapter Summary

> It is fascinating how easily Will can influence the investigations; helping Jack catch the killers that he does not find interesting, while making sure he does not get too close to the Chesapeake Ripper or Will's own trail of bodies.

Will is one of the first people to arrive at the crime scene. One of the advantages of living in Baltimore compared to Wolf Trap is that the commute is a lot faster and easier. Moving in with Hannibal has come with some other perks too, such as decadent and nutritious meals every day. They spend occasional weekends at Will's old place so that he can fish and the dogs can have more roaming room. Having a house in the middle of nowhere is also awfully convenient, as they would prefer to not have any accidental witnesses for their select leisure activities.

Will's mind drifts back to his cataclysmic encounter with Randall Tier and the day he wreaked havoc in Hannibal's office. They were a turning point, the first stop on his journey of self-discovery. He was set on that journey by Hannibal's skillful and insidious manipulations (and some wilful cooperation from Will himself, if he dares to admit), and the destination was to become acquainted with a part of himself that he has kept buried all his life.

That deviant, hedonistic, cunning part that would see the beauty in murder and torture, right down to enjoying executing it himself.

Will has stopped trying to run from it, instead welcoming it to take residence in his head, unrestrained. He has been ready for it to consume him entirely for a while now, yet there is one facet of his complex nature that still fights back. He wants to laugh at himself. Will Graham, a man wrapped up in his goddamned virtuousness, so morally high-and-mighty, a man who would hang onto his good heart and empathy even if they end up being his downfall.

Killing bad people feels good.

Satisfying. Magnificent. *Ecstatic* . And he has never denied that. Killing people who have not done anything to deserve their life to be violently taken from them, however, is what his conscience cannot agree with. And he is at peace with that. There are plenty of people whose death would make the world a better place. He keeps a list of their names, safely tucked in his mind.

Today's crime scene is at the courtyard in front of a church. The victim's body is displayed in the shape of a cross, arms stretched out to the sides. The man is dressed in a black robe,

complete with a Roman collar and a sturdy golden crucifix pendant around his neck. All visible parts of his skin - the head, neck and hands - have been burned off, revealing raging red flesh underneath, laced with blotches of blood, cooked and solidified by the heat to a dark hickory-brown mass. The man's eyes have been removed, and the empty sockets charred until they are pitch black, resembling the depths of Hell.

Will marvels at the way his creation looks in the bright morning light, so different from when he last saw it 8 or so hours ago, enveloped by the darkness of the starless night sky. When he closes his eyes momentarily, it feels like no time has passed at all.

He lets Penelope Rivas make her debut at narrating what happened at the crime scene. She is quite accurate, describing Will's actions with commendable precision. He corroborates her analysis, filling in a couple of small elements that she missed. Jack was not mistaken when he said Penelope's ability to interpret the evidence is on par with Will's.

"Someone must have strong feelings about religion", Jack infers after they finish narrating the intricacies of the murder tableau.

"It's not personal. The killer doesn't care about religion, he is using it to show us how he perceives the victim", Penelope suggests. As expected, she is not wrong.

"The Devil himself, disguised as a priest. Burning with the fire of the Inferno", Will elaborates.

The blowtorch had been his personal addition to his and Hannibal's expansive assortment of tools. A truly wonderful addition, scorching the skin quickly and efficiently. Will thinks about acquiring a pyrography pen next, one that works as precisely on flesh as it does on wood.

"The victim has done something unforgivable", Jack guesses, and Will gives him a slow affirmative nod.

This is a dangerous game, walking the thin line between offering enough helpful hints about the murders to maintain an authentic facade, but not revealing so much that he would get himself or Hannibal caught. Most of the time, he is not too worried. With all his inside knowledge of the intricacies of murder investigations and with Hannibal watching his back, there is no way Will would leave any traces linking back to them.

The Quantico BSU team is brilliant at determining the 'when', 'how' and 'why' of the murders, but the 'who' is what they need Will and his insights for. It is fascinating how easily he can influence the investigations; helping Jack catch the killers that he does not find interesting, while making sure he does not get too close to the Chesapeake Ripper or Will's own trail of bodies.

Penelope Rivas is a new addition to the equation. But since Will has the head of BSU wrapped around his little finger, it should be easy enough to puppeteer one unsuspecting profiler with effortless tugs of that same finger.

Another reason why he is not worried about being suspected is because of his ‘moral alibi’, as he calls it. There is a label permanently pinned on him, plastered on his forehead with neon signs flashing around it: ‘The guy who didn’t kill all these people’. His name had dominated the crime section of the mainstream press for months, everyone knows his face and story. An innocent man’s tragedy, the FBI’s biggest fuck-up; featuring all juicy details about his battle with mental illness, incarceration for the murders he never committed, the trial that ended with a dead judge and subsequent exoneration from all crimes once the Ripper decdied he was done playing with him.

Anyone who has heard of Will Graham would feel guilty to even insinuate that he, the guy that ’didn’t kill all these people’, could in fact be a killer.

It had taken Will a while to understand why Hannibal had orchestrated this entire spectacle, painting him as a murderer and then painting unquestionable innocence over the top. Now Will has a newfound appreciation for it. It was Hannibal’s gift to him, a ‘moral alibi’ against anyone who dares to think he has anything to do with the recent murders.

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The next few meetings at Hannibal’s office are a lot less disastrous. Will is still bitter, he cannot quite decide if it would be more satisfying to murder Hannibal in a slow and painful way, or to get the answers from him that he so desperately wants. He offers to pay for the damage he caused to Hannibal’s office last time he visited, but makes sure to not offer an apology. Hannibal seems content with that.

“While a compass is an excellent tool for navigation in most instances, it doesn’t point exactly north”, Hannibal speaks in a soothing monotonous voice, “The Earth’s magnetic North Pole is not the same as ‘True North’, the Earth’s geographic North Pole. The magnetic North Pole is situated about 1,000 miles away from the True North. The same can be said about the moral compass of humanity. Most people use their moral compass to navigate through life because it leads them close enough to True North. But eventually one will find that the direction shown by his moral compass starts to diverge from the direction his true nature has set him on.”

Will brings his consciousness back into the present moment, from where he was mentally straddling Hannibal on the floor, hammering the man’s face with his fists until there is no more smugness and indifference left, finally getting to the answers beneath. Why did he do what he did to Will? Why did he undo it? What is the point in all of this?

“Huh?” he responds slowly.

“What I am saying, Will, is that the direction your moral compass points at the moment can contradict with the direction of where you want to go. As conflicting as it may be, don’t let it sway you off the course set by your true nature.”

He thinks about the moral compass metaphor for a second. Somehow, Hannibal seems to know exactly what questions are driving Will’s mind insane. He brings them to light and lets him examine his values and beliefs, only encouraging him further when Will’s interpretations

start to spill into the abnormal and morally corrupt territory. Doing that feels oddly liberating.

Maybe he is not as bad of a therapist as Will thought.

"So you're saying that my moral code is the only thing stopping me from becoming a cold-blooded killer?" he says, toying with the idea in his head.

"Yes, my dear Will. And when the compass inevitably wants to shift, you should let it."

He notices the term of endearment that Hannibal slipped into the sentence. Whenever Will has let anyone see his every dimension, every surface of his multifaceted self, he was met with concern and disapproval. Instead, Hannibal looks at him with curiosity and fondness. In those moments, Will finds himself forgetting to be bitter and vengeful towards the man.

Will cannot help but notice that whenever Hannibal is around people, there is a certain aura of supremacy about him, like he is above them all. Unsurprising, coming from a man who sees other people as nothing but meat. However, the feeling of superiority does not seem to be there when he is with Will. When he uses his empathy to peek through Hannibal's carefully crafted facade of emotionlessness, he sees a certain level of respect and adoration aimed towards himself.

Hannibal seems to see Will as worthy of his time, which Will largely enjoys. He can always kill him later. Or turn him in to Jack. Or use Hannibal's affinity for him to get deep into his head and make him suffer from the inside, like he did to Will. There are many possibilities, but right now he is not too fond of any of them.

"I would like to invite you to join me on a late night venture. Tuesday night, 1:00 AM", Hannibal says, interrupting his train of thought once again.

Will feels like Hannibal has somehow read his thoughts, and is now throwing him a bait. He does not need to strain his imagination too much to picture all the different scenarios Hannibal's venture would involve. He is certain that all of them would end with dead bodies. The thought is scary but intriguing. He has come this far; it would be a waste to let such a precious opportunity pass by. If Hannibal sees Will as worthy, he fully intends to keep things that way.

"I'll be there", he finds himself saying.

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Later that day, the team meets in Jack's office to share their updates on the priest case. Will stands to the side, hands tucked into his pockets. It is a subconscious mannerism he picked up after developing his bloodthirsty alter ego; always acutely aware of where his hands are and where his fingerprints could be found. Conveniently, it is something he can play off as general awkwardness.

"His name was Terence Coates, a priest at the St Ignatius Church", Zeller announces.

“Interestingly, he was accused of molesting several kids but was never prosecuted because of the statute of limitation laws”, Price continues, “Rivas and Graham nailed it. The guy is the Devil.”

“A man who managed to escape justice”, Jack concludes, “could be another victim of the Virginia Vigilante”.

“I’m surprised the Vigilante hasn’t sodomised him in some brutal way”, Zeller says, “Let the man get a taste of his own medicine. Karma is a bitch, you know?”

“That would be perverted and unnecessary. Too much of a cliche”, Will replies, word for word what he had told Hannibal when he had asked if Will was going to grace Coates’s anal cavity with a ribbed knife. Or with that blowtorch he had been so eager to try out.

The mental image of that does not seem too appealing to Will. While displaying his victims in a way that exposes and humiliates them for their crimes can be fun, it is not necessary for him. He does not kill people because of their wrongdoings, per se. He does it out of his overpowering hedonistic need, and they fit the bill that is set by his moral code. He allows himself a moment of self-indulgence once in a while, and the world gets rid of another bad man. It is a win-win.

“Oh please Graham”, Price sighs dramatically, “The Vigilante is the definition of a cliche. A noble man who takes it upon himself to right all the wrongs in the world.”

Will shrugs, unbothered by Price’s mockery of his work.

“To be fair, what Coates did to those kids was fucking vile. Part of me wishes the Vigilante doesn’t get caught for this”, Zeller admits jokingly.

“Oh boy, me neither”, Will flashes him a wide grin on his way out.

If it were not for his teaching duties this afternoon, he would have spent the rest of the day pulling the wool over Price and Zeller’s eyes, endlessly amused at their obliviousness to his offhanded hints. He heads towards the lecture theatre, mentally preparing himself for the 2-hour epitome of boredom called ‘Introduction to Criminal Profiling Methods’ that he has to deliver. Teaching at the academy is one of Will’s least favourite parts of his job, and he has to remind himself why it is essential.

Being part of the teaching staff gives him access to exclusive FBI databases with detailed records of exactly what he needs, dating back decades. An archive of unsolved cases, lists of the scumbags they do not yet have sufficient evidence to prosecute, other lowlives who have escaped punishment through mistrials, tampering with evidence or the jury, and so forth. A vigilante’s goldmine. Will browses through the records and displays the most interesting cases on his lecture slides, teaching the students about the flaws of the law enforcement and court systems. No one would think there is more to it.

He thinks of himself as an eyelash. Always in your field of vision, easy to see if you focus on it. But most people look past their eyelashes, focusing attention to what is in front of them. It is exactly how Will likes it. Being in everyone’s periphery, always seen but never *noticed*.

North-East

Chapter Summary

Will gets a chance to watch a sickeningly delightful crime scene unfold in front of his own eyes rather than his imagination, for once. And there is nothing more obscene yet satisfying - intimate, some part of him dares to say - than receiving the experience from the Chesapeake Ripper himself.

Chapter Notes

In short, Will has a date with the Chesapeake Ripper ;)

Will sits in the break room, absent-mindedly chewing through his work lunch, *Omelette au Jambon* that Hannibal had prepared, concentrating on grading his students' papers. Concentrating, until his peaceful workflow is interrupted by Penelope Rivas.

"Mind the company?" she asks, holding a plate with two pizza slices from the cafeteria.

Will does mind. But saying that would be impolite and make him look unsociable and withdrawn. Dark and moody, like Sweeney Todd, if he had to compare himself to a fictional character of a similar caliber.

Having the typical serial killer personality is a real hindrance if you are trying to get away with being one.

He needs to do better, push himself to be more extroverted and approachable. Like Dexter Morgan, while he is on the topic of fictional murderers. Dexter's friendly persona seems like a suitable one to aspire to, in terms of sociableness at least. Will already surpasses him in terms of having a profound sex drive - another part of himself that he discovered after becoming closely acquainted with Hannibal.

"Not at all", he smiles at Penelope, pushing the papers aside.

"I don't know if Jack told you -" she says, sitting down and digging into her pizza, "- that I do exactly what you do at the crime scenes. *The exact same way you do* ."

The words pique Will's interest, but also his skepticism. He knows better than anyone that you cannot think like a killer unless you are a killer. With each body Will leaves behind, it becomes easier to empathise with other murderers at crime scenes. He is tempted to ask

Penelope how many lives she has taken, compare her count to his, see if she is just as far gone as he is. A big part of him hopes she is not like him, just a good-hearted empath who is only able to temporarily enter the killers' mind states, not have one of her own. It takes one to know one after all, and he would rather she did not know.

"I noticed the other day, when you analysed the priest case", he responds with a neutral tone.

"Empathy disorder, that's what you call it here right?"

"No, that's Tattlecrime. I call it interpreting the evidence."

Of course she has read the nonsense Freddie Lounds spews. He was exonerated two years ago but somehow he is still her favourite topic to write about; the man who is not a serial killer but looks like one.

"You must have read everything about me then."

"I have. But I'd rather get to know you personally than through a nosy crime journalist's eyes", Penelope assures him with a warm smile.

Will is not fond of being known personally, moreso now than ever before. His interest in Penelope's abilities turns into apprehension, despite how good-intentioned she seems. He tries to discount it as simply feeling replaceable and incompetent at his job, not catching enough killers. Due to his unique killer-like thinking, the FBI has never posed any performance standards that Will has to meet, nor any threats to his moonlighter identity. And now he feels that both his day job and night occupation have been placed under scrutiny.

He needs to talk to Jack, get answers as to why he hired Penelope to work alongside him. It hurts Will's pride to admit that he feels insecure and threatened by one pesky agent. But if he can admit it to himself, he can admit it to Jack. He is used to being open with Jack, due to the deep-rooted and honest friendship they have shared for years. Well, as honest of a friendship as Will can allow these days.

"You know, I admire that you're still here at the FBI, after everything that happened to you. I know it's not easy", Penelope speaks.

"You don't *know* what it's like."

Will does not mean to sound so bitter, but his mouth talks before his brain can stop it. She does not seem offended.

"Maybe not, but I *see you* . Better than most people do."

The words send chills down Will's spine, echoing through his vertebrae with an uncomfortable singe. He does not want to be seen. Especially not by someone who claims to have the same extraordinary insight into the minds of killers as he does. It is as if he is hiding skeletons in his closet, and she has X-ray vision.

"What do you see?", he asks cautiously.

“You’re a complicated man”, she drawls, eyes studying him intently, like a hunter trying to spot elusive prey, “You don’t want people to know who you really are.”

Will instinctively tilts his head down, letting his glasses slide down his nose to conceal his eyes. A physical barrier to break unwanted eye contact, shielding his real self from people. It is an old habit from when he had less things to hide, and less eyes that are capable of seeing past tricks like this. It had not worked on Hannibal or Jack, so it would definitely not work on Penelope, with her impeccable ability to read people through their emotions. Will finds himself acutely needing other defenses.

“Pretty sure everyone knows who I am”, he argues with an over-dramatic eye roll, “Layers of complex trauma dating back to childhood, hidden behind layers of cynicism and crude jokes. With some trust issues on top.”

A morbid sense of humour and sarcastic self-pity have become Will’s signature move against people’s prying questions about his real nature. Out of all psychological defense mechanisms, they seem to work the best. Occasionally his bitter humour makes his colleagues laugh too, which is always a bonus. The regular dark and grotesque jokes he and Zeller throw back and forth at each other somehow make him seem more human.

“You’re self-aware, a good quality to have”, Penelope laughs.

“So what’s your tragic backstory?” Will asks, steering the topic away from himself, “because you can’t claim to be able to get into killers’ heads without them doing the same to you and messing up your life.”

He keeps his tone light, half-joking, a distraction from the fact that her gaze is making him squirm uncomfortably on the inside.

“My deep dark trauma is not something I share in the first week of meeting someone”, she says, a smile tugging the corners of her lips.

The way she deflects his question makes Will think she has skeletons in her closet too. But he is perfectly happy to not go searching through her closet, or storage unit, attic, holiday cottage, whatsoever, if it means she does not go searching though his. The said closets being the shed behind his house in Wolf Trap, the thoroughly equipped basement at Hannibal’s place, and the Ford Falcon they keep hidden in the woods to use for all their ventures on the wrong side of the law.

“But delving right into trauma is what you and I do for a living, don’t we?”

Penelope laughs at his remark, her eyes eventually landing on Jack, who has poked his head into the room after spotting them talking to each other.

“I see that you two are getting along great. I expect the Chesapeake Ripper and the Virginia Vigilante arrested by tomorrow”, he says jokingly.

In your *fucking* dreams, Jack, Will wants to say.

“Anything for you, Jack”, he says instead.

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It still surprises Will how easy it was to accept Hannibal’s invitation to the late-night rendezvous. After pondering for days, he has settled on the conclusion that Hannibal is going to have him experience a murder, in whatever way that may be. He is not sure if he is expected to be an observer or a participant, and wonders how far his involvement is going to go if he is given the choice. The uncertainty gnaws at his insides, breaking him into cold sweat. Nothing he has participated in or witnessed before has been premeditated .

The thought is chilling. There is no familiar weight of a gun holstered at his hip tonight, and Will feels exposed. He has a date with the Chesapeake Ripper; it would be considered rude to bring a weapon. Besides, he is relatively certain that neither of them wants to harm the other tonight. It is an exercise in trust.

At 1:00 AM sharp, an inconspicuous beige Ford Falcon stops in front of him, where he is standing at the edge of a corn field. It is not Hannibal’s usual car, so Will takes an educated guess that he has brought somebody with him. Locked in the trunk, most likely.

“Good evening, Will.”

“Hello, Hannibal”, he replies, somehow managing to keep his voice even, despite the desperate thumps coming from the trunk. Or maybe that is the sound of his heart struggling against his ribcage, trying to break free. He is not sure, it is all blending together too well.

“I see the question burning at the tip of your tongue. Why have I chosen Rene here to grace us with his presence tonight?”, Hannibal motions towards the trunk, “What has he done to warrant this?”

Will nods silently, inviting him to continue.

“My meat reserves are running low. To me, it’s as good a reason as any.”

Will raises his eyebrows in disbelief, shocked by Hannibal’s brutal honesty. He expected Hannibal to lie to him, tell him this was a bad man, try to manipulate Will into thinking that what he was about to witness was not wrong on all levels.

“He cheated on his wife, probably committed minor tax fraud, maybe earned a speeding fine or two. But none of that would make him a bad man in your books, would it, Will?”

“No.” He finds himself unable to produce anything more than a whisper.

“In that case I apologise for not being able to appease your morals tonight.”

Will can tell there is no real apology, the words merely polite pretence. Hannibal would not really ask for forgiveness - it is all a deliberate ploy to sway his moral compass.

"Thank you for not lying to me about this", is all he manages to say in return.

He should have expected this. Hannibal's morality is vastly different from his own, after all. He has to correct himself; Hannibal does not have morality, only morale. The man in front of him does not need to hide the fact that he would murder purely for his own hedonistic desires. Maybe Rene is rude in Hannibal's subjective opinion, offensive even, but does he deserve to die because of it?

Will feels his gut twist into an uncomfortable sickening knot. The fight or flight response creeps up in the back of his brain, telling him to run. He could conjure up a distraction, bolt for the car and probably get away relatively unharmed, go straight to Jack and tell him everything. Yet his feet are firmly planted on the ground. He has walked right into the Chesapeake Ripper's den, willingly and unarmed. And he knows he is going to walk out of it perfectly intact. Who says he should not play with fire, if the fire has no intention to burn him?

"Rene's fate tonight is inevitable. I see that you are not intending to do anything to change that. So what is stopping you from playing an active part in his demise?"

Hannibal picks out a knife out of his large bag of supplies and holds it out to Will. Will swallows hard against his Adam's apple.

"You know where I stand. I'm not going to kill an innocent man", he says firmly.

He is inches away from Hannibal, their eyes interlocked, daring to defy him. Daring to defy Hannibal while he is holding the knife, also inches away. Will wonders if his defiance would get him gutted there and then if he were anyone other than who he is. He is not scared, only curious.

"As you wish", Hannibal responds nonchalantly, putting the knife back and taking out the rest of his tools, arranging them on the hood of the car, "but witnessing a murder still makes you an accomplice. Does that not bother you?"

He sounds more like the psychiatrist Will has come to know than a cold-blooded monster. The man is examining his moral code, pointing out how flawed it is. Will is aware that his stance does not make much sense. He is not going to kill a man but he will watch him die and do nothing. Why? To impress Hannibal? To gain his trust and use it to his advantage later? Or maybe just to indulge in the unique opportunity presented to him. A chance to watch a sickeningly delightful crime scene unfold in front of his own eyes rather than his imagination, for once. And there is nothing more obscene yet satisfying - intimate, some part of him dares to say - than receiving the experience from the Chesapeake Ripper himself.

Will shrugs. "Curiosity doesn't have to kill the cat, does it?"

He stands back and watches Hannibal work. There is a chill in the air, not just because of the temperature. Will follows intently with his gaze as Hannibal hauls poor Rene out of the trunk.

Thank God the man does not scream. Will does not think his legs would hold if he can endure hearing a soul-crushing cry of help right now. Hannibal injects a carefully measured dose of unnamed substance into his victim's jugular vein. A paralysing agent? Or an immediately acting poison? For the man's sake Will hopes for the latter. He is sure Zeller and Price will fill him in on all the details tomorrow once the body is discovered.

Hannibal places the limp body onto its back on a large sheet of plastic, always meticulous about making minimal mess. He slices through the man's chest and stomach with one slow and deep laceration. There is a whirr of a bone saw and more slicing and cutting with an array of knives and surgical scissors. The coppery smell of arterial blood fills the air, tickling the inside of Will's nostrils. He watches, transfixed, as all of the organs, flesh and bones of the torso are carved out and discarded into a pile on the side. Only the man's liver makes its way into Hannibal's discreet cooler. Will makes a mental note to not accept Hannibal's invitations for dinner in the near future.

It takes almost an hour for the torso to be completely hollowed out. The only part left is the spine, to maintain the body's original shape. Hannibal stuffs the empty chest cavity with hay from the field, then stitches it up loosely, so that the dry grass sticks out from between the stitches. Then he attaches the body to a large pole stuck in the ground, facing the field. A human scarecrow. Will is mortified but fascinated at the same time.

By the time Hannibal finishes his gruesome art piece and sheds his plastic suit inside the car, Will is still standing there, having barely moved the entire time. Hannibal comes to stand close to him, studying Will's reaction to his work. He feels Hannibal's chin come to rest on his shoulder, whispering in his ear.

"Look at you Will, watching Chesapeake Ripper in his element. And there is not a single part of you that wants to run to Jack."

Hannibal inches closer, as if to see if Will would flinch and step back at the sudden realisation that he is right in the monster's grip. But he stays perfectly still. He closes his eyes, steadies his heartbeat and breathes in the scent of fresh blood in Hannibal's hair.

It feels like a moment shared between a predator and prey. Intensely intimate before turning fatal. Except that he is not sure who is who. Is Hannibal the predator, letting him watch the scarecrow man's fate before making it his own? Or is Will the predator, playing along while collecting the necessary evidence to put Hannibal behind bars? Are they both predators, equally complicit? Or are they the prey, victims of the otherworldly bloodlust that forces morally vulnerable men to commit atrocious acts?

Will could choose to never answer those questions. Hannibal is there, just one blade length away. He could have decided to be smart rather than curious and brought his switchblade, concealed somewhere in his layers of clothes. He could plunge that blade into Hannibal, overpower him, catch him in the act with the victim's blood still on him and the Ripper's entire infamous arsenal of tools spread on the hood of the car. He could defeat the Chesapeake Ripper all by himself, prove his worth as the FBI's finest. He is one blade thrust away from ending it all. He sees the perfect opportunity, lets it entertain his mind for a moment or two, and lets it go.

“The FBI’s finest, gone awry”, Hannibal muses, as if he could read Will’s mind, “How does that make you feel?”

Will laughs at the question, the overused cliche in therapy. On the second thought, the evening does feel quite therapeutic.

“I feel intrigued”, he replies.

East-Northeast

Chapter Summary

> “I let you stay the night and you thank me by stabbing a man in my living room?”

Chapter Notes

> This one is just 2600 words of Will being a lying little shit and being well... dark Will. Enjoy!

They have caught another killer. Will’s invaluable insight had been the key contribution, as usual. Congratulations and friendly pats on the back find their way to him. He has never liked being touched, moreso now than ever. It feels that physical touch allows people to get close, as if they can sense his secrets through skin on skin contact.

There is an announcement about donuts and cake in the break room, and everyone heads in that direction, following the sweet scent. Will stays back. He would rather have a Snickers bar from the vending machine and a quiet afternoon than artisan donuts and small talk. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Jack lingering in the doorway.

“I really appreciate everything that you do for us, Will”, Jack says, moving to sit next to him.

“It’s no problem. Always happy to do my part to make the world a better place.”

“It’s good to have you. Good to have you happy and healthy”, Jack places emphasis on the last words.

Will’s well-being is something Jack takes seriously, still riddled with guilt for not believing him about the Copycat Killer. Will feels bad for the man. The evidence against him was convincing, so he cannot blame Jack for seeing what the Ripper wanted him to see. It still hurts, but Jack is working hard to rebuild the trust, and Will lets him. It feels good to have a friend.

“Hannibal takes good care of me.”

Jack has been supportive of their relationship from the beginning, and Will finds genuine relief in that.

“Good. No more sleepwalking or hallucinations? I still feel responsible for pushing you too far before...” Jack trails off. He is a good man, sometimes too good even.

“I’m much better. I’m in therapy. My psychiatrist is great. The meds are helping.”

Jack sighs, his warm expression changing into something else.

“The meds would be way more helpful if you actually took them, Will.”

Will blinks, making sure he heard right. “What?”

“The drug test. I looked at your results. There’s no traces of psychoactive meds in your sample. Hasn’t been for months.”

Will feels Jack’s gaze on him, sharp, piercing through his eye sockets right to the back of his brain. The routine drug test that they take as part of their job only screens for recreational drugs, it would not reveal whether or not he takes the benzodiazepines his psychiatrist prescribes. Jack must have ordered additional analyses on his sample. Will realises he made a mistake. A careless mistake.

He closes his eyes, braces his arms on his knees and exhales, trying to collect his thoughts. He wants to yell at Jack for breaching privacy, for being unethical, unprofessional and more importantly, *distrusting* . So much for Jack trying to rebuild the trust. Will wants to confront him, but acting defensive would only make him look more suspicious.

“Jack, look, I...” Will mumbles, starting to fidget with his glasses, “I’m sorry I lied about the meds. I need this. This work is what’s keeping me sane. Knowing that I’m saving people is what I need to stop myself from spiralling. I’m stable enough without pills. I’m doing just fine, see?”

He may be sounding desperate, but he is telling the truth. He needs Jack, his kind-hearted discipline, to prevent him from plummeting into his dark mind beyond return. Their friendship helps him stay grounded, reminds him that this is the reality he lives in, stops him from being entirely consumed by his sadistic alter ego.

Sometimes Will feels like he is drowning in a dark body of water he has willingly walked into, and Jack is the lifejacket.

“Will…” Jack’s voice is stern, disapproving. It reminds him of his father and sends shivers down his spine.

“I can’t be helpful to you if the drugs are dulling my senses”, he objects softly.

“You’re also not helpful to me when you’re unstable and allow killers like the Ripper to mess with your head.” Jack can be brutal and straightforward when he wants to. Right now, Will feels that he deserves it.

“That won’t happen again”, he states, his voice firm and reassuring.

“If this gets too much and you need a break, I’ll give it. Hell, if you tell me honestly that you won’t pass the next psych eval, I’ll look the other way because I know how much being in the field means to you. But if you lie to me again, I won’t let it slide.”

Jack’s words sound menacing, but Will knows they come from the place of care and concern. The regret he feels for disappointing the man is sincere.

“I should’ve been honest with you Jack. I’m sorry”, Will says quietly.

He let his guard down once and now has to pay the price. And Jack’s trust is a hefty price, something Will is not willing to gamble with. He hopes it is not too late to make things right. He wonders why Jack felt the need to order additional tests on his sample. Has he been not convincing enough about his mental stability? If Jack felt the need to investigate him for lying, what else could he be suspecting Will of?

He has always been bad at social interaction, appearing reserved and inauthentic even if the emotions he feels are genuine. He needs to do better, outwardly display enough layers of his complex traumatised personality that Jack does not think to dig deeper. He has got it all inside his mind, he just needs to show it, externalise instead of keeping it all down. Maybe instead of the perfectly recovered Will Graham, he needs to show Jack the disturbed and ill-adjusted Will Graham?

All the raw emotion, the hurt from being abandoned and rejected by everyone, the deep terror he felt when left rotting in that cell, alone with his mind for months without end. Even certain bitterness towards Hannibal still lingers in his mind, even though he has come to love him. He needs to wear the pain and trauma openly on his face, so people do not try to look for it inside his head.

He would do absolutely whatever was necessary to stop anyone from getting in his head.

Suddenly it dawns on him. This is exactly why Jack hired a second profiler.

***

Will has trouble sleeping. It feels like his senses are particularly on edge, picking up every sound and smell in the unfamiliar room, forcing him to toss and turn for hours. And then there are his thoughts, being even more distracting. The entire story of how he ended up spending the night at Hannibal’s is completely ridiculous.

They had been immersed in discussing the serial murder case Will had been working on, until the midnight chime of Hannibal’s antique cabinet clock brought them back to reality. Will felt incredibly inconsiderate for staying so late and hurried to leave, but discovered that his car would not start, his moderate self-consciousness turning into full-blown embarrassment. Of course, Hannibal’s Bentley did not have the right type of engine to jump start his empty car battery. So naturally, Hannibal had offered for him to stay the night in the guest room.

It sounds like a cheap movie plot; a series of unfortunate events leads the protagonist to stay the night at a serial killer's house, where he inevitably gets murdered in his sleep. Or seduced. Will is not sure which option would end up being more disastrous if he really were to die in this room, figuratively or literally. Though, perhaps the latter would be a more enjoyable way to go. Either way, he is doomed.

He hears footsteps echoing downstairs. Here it comes. Will waits for what feels like centuries, the sounds never reaching the second floor where the bedrooms are. He feels his old friend paranoia crawl up the back of his neck and settle in his brain, leaving a trail of cold sweat behind. Hannibal's steps are always even and purposeful, but what Will is hearing seems erratic and unsure. Between being surrounded by real-life killers at work and imaginary ones in his nightmares, he is used to the feeling that something sinister is always creeping nearby.

Will rises to his feet silently and starts making his way downstairs. Peeking from halfway down the stairs, he can clearly see a dark figure in the lounge. A figure that does not look like Hannibal. He stays where he is for a moment, blinking and staring hard until he is sure it is not just another of his hallucinations. There really is a man in the house. A burglar? It would not be surprising, considering that Hannibal's property is located in one of the most affluent suburbs of Baltimore. Could he be armed? More than likely, Will thinks.

He needs to act quickly.

Before his brain catches up to his feet, Will has ducked into the kitchen and grabbed one of Hannibal's chunky kitchen knives, silently lifting it from its holder on the wall. He mentally curses himself for leaving his gun in the car.

He presses his back against the wall, the cold wood soothing his sweaty skin. He should find a way to make a loud noise, startling the burglar and making him flee. He is sure there is nothing he could run away with that Hannibal's extensive home insurance policy would not cover.

The most alarming part is that the intruder was somehow able to avoid triggering the security system. The system is elaborate, Will knows there are several cameras and motion sensors. The man has to be smart. From his days of working in the police force, Will recalls that most burglaries happen during the day when no one is home, not at night.

This must be something else.

What if someone saw them in the field that night, turning a person into a scarecrow? What if they tracked them back to this house? Will is decent at hand to hand combat, and he has a weapon. And if they made enough noise, Hannibal would come to his aid. He should at least get a look at the intruder, to know who they could possibly be up against.

A sudden gleam of light bounces off the wall next to him, like light reflecting off a blade of a knife.

Will deduces that both of them must have a weapon. However, he still has the element of surprise to his advantage. From where he is pressed to the wall next to the lounge room door, he hears the man move just around the corner.

He leaps into the room, disorienting the intruder with a sharp punch aimed at his head and knocks him onto the ground. The man swings the weapon, a streak of light reflecting off the edge of the blade again, but Will is prepared. He traps the burglar's arm under his knee, knocking the object out of his hand. It tumbles out of reach, clattering across the floor.

As he delivers another powerful punch to keep the man subdued, Will's mind flashes to the previous times he was in a situation like this. With Garrett Jacob Hobbs, he had to end it to save his daughter. With Randall Tier, he had to end it to save himself. And now. Who is he saving?

He turns to look at the man's knife, now several feet away on the ground, his mind screaming at him to save himself as a justification.

All he sees on the floor is a torch.

There is no weapon. There never was. There is no reason for Will to end this.

With that thought, he readjusts his grip on his knife and plunges it into the centre of the man's abdomen.

Because he does not need a reason.

The second thrust of the blade into the intruder's flesh happens almost as a reflex, a second nature.

Because there is nothing that makes him feel more alive than taking the life from someone else, like a light bulb draining the livelihood out of its energy source, making him shine brighter.

The third stab of his knife is bliss.

Up until the agonising screams start ringing in his ears, the burst of deep crimson red flooding his vision, his frenzied heartbeat threatening to shatter his ribcage. He scrambles back from the body, still on his hands and knees, the rational and conscientious part of his brain finally overpowering the hedonistic one. Spurts of thick blood are erupting from where the knife is still stuck deep in the man's stomach, but his excruciating shrieking is getting fainter. Will just watches, unable to tear his eyes off the gruesome image he created.

It is not until he hears Hannibal clear his throat that he realises he is not alone. Hannibal slowly lowers his gaze to the dying man on the floor, and then back to Will. The look on his face is amused but pleased. Will stares at him blankly in return. They stay like that in silence, until it is only the two of them left breathing.

"I let you stay the night and you thank me by stabbing a man in my living room?"

"He was. I didn't-", Will stammers in response, words getting tangled in his throat.

"Was he armed?"

"No…", he whispers, glancing at the man's flashlight, a puddle of blood slowly spreading underneath it.

Will is still kneeling on the ground, his breathing arrhythmic and vision blurring at the edges. It feels like the beginning of those blackout moments that Hannibal had induced in him. He wishes this was one of them and that he had been hypnotised, not in control of his actions, absolving him of the blame and responsibility. Except this time he knows he did it out of his own volition, controlled by nothing else but his own urges. And that is exactly why he is terrified.

"Interesting. Did you realise that before or after you decided to kill him, Will?"

Hannibal's piercing question echoes in the room, the heavy words constricting Will's chest, forcing him to say the worst part out loud. He cannot bring himself to say it.

"After", he utters with a ragged breath, choking on his own lies.

He needs a justification for his actions so desperately that he is willing to outright lie, more to deceive his own mind than to deceive Hannibal. Hoping to coax his moral compass to point in the right direction, find the remorse that he seems to have lost somewhere along the way. Because the truth is way too wrong *to face. What kind of a sick creature would decide to kill an unarmed man purely because he knew it would feel good to?*

Hannibal raises an eyebrow at Will's answer, recognising a lie when he sees one. But to Will's great amusement, he does not challenge it. Instead, his eyes are full of delight and pride, and his voice is soothing as he speaks.

"Self-defense removes the need for motive. Speaking of motive, anyone would consider breaking and entering rude."

Will tries to protest that a burglary is not an offence punishable by death, but before he opens his mouth, Hannibal places gentle hands under his arms and helps him up from the floor.

"You must be freezing, Will. Please help yourself to a beverage or two from my bar while I retrieve a change of clothing."

Will only half-registers the words. He cannot stop staring at his trembling hands, for once wishing there were strings attached to them, wishing he were a marionette puppeteered by an otherworldly monster. But he knows that this is not a nightmare he can wake up from, or a hypnotic trance he can snap out of. This is real.

Will Graham is not the marionette, he is the monster. He knows he is, and he should feel like one. But instead, he feels like a man who gazed into the mirror of his soul at his dark reflection, and decided he likes what he sees.

East

Chapter Summary

> “You aren't scared of me, are you, Will?”
>
> “Not at all."
>
> “Then you shouldn’t be scared of yourself either.”

Chapter Notes

> Finally some Hannibal's POV here. It's surprisingly easy and fun to write!

Hannibal finds himself thinking about the burglar incident quite often. It was another scenario he had deliberately set in motion. All he had needed to do was set the stage; offer Will modafinil-infused tea to make sure he would stay awake all night, tamper with his car battery, bribe an opportunistic lowlife to break into the house that night and give him the access codes to disarm the security system. The rest of Hannibal's spectacle had unfolded beautifully in the exact way he had planned.

As much as it was beneficial for Will’s journey or self-discovery at the time, Hannibal never enjoyed hiding things from him. These days he does not need to keep his beloved partner in the dark anymore. It brings Hannibal great pleasure to be able to be honest with Will, to share his gruesome nature with him, and be part of the other man’s exploration of his own equally gruesome desires. Now, Hannibal only uses his deception skills around Will if absolutely necessary, manipulating things around him to help him navigate the part of him he has kept buried for too long.

While Will concentrates on maintaining his duality as the FBI’s most skilled and simultaneously FBI’s most wanted, Hannibal makes plans for their future.

He is familiar with playing the long game, one that would ensure his and Will’s safety and freedom, if things were to turn sour. He has a scapegoat for the Ripper murders planned out, the scheme involving a certain director of a psychiatric facility and a certain long-lost trainee of Jack’s. But framing and hurting innocent people is something Will’s conscience could not agree with. Learning that Hannibal is plotting something like this would cause him significant distress, and Hannibal hates being the cause of his pain. So he holds off, for now.

Hannibal has started preparing a scapegoat for the Vigilante murders too, a law student whom he meets at the guest lecture on criminal psychology that he is delivering. Hannibal takes interest in the young man's thesis, and they start meeting up at his office to discuss it. Gradually, he de-magnetises the man's moral compass, encourages him to question his beliefs about laws, justice and his own morality, assimilates his values to those of the Virginia Vigilante.

It is what Hannibal does best; exerting his influence on people subtly over time, no outright manipulation, but rather conversations with a specific agenda. He makes sure there is no traceable connection between him and the student, ensures no one is aware they know each other. Not even Will. Hannibal is going to tell him later, when the time is right and he is sure that Will is going to understand. For now, he is content to wait.

***

The burglar's now cold body is still in the room where Will left him, the blood on the floor starting to slowly dry. Will makes sure not to look in that direction as he makes his way to the liquor shelf, following Hannibal's suggestion to have a drink. The vivid memories of sinking the knife into the man's chest keep replaying behind his eyelids. He pours a rather generous serving of top label scotch and gulps it down, the alcohol warming his insides. Before he notices, he has already refilled the glass.

It is not the panic and the shaking Will is trying to drown with liquor. It is that sweet feeling of power, indulgence and pure euphoria that he feels in his chest, warming his insides in a whole new kind of way. The morally upright part of him screams that he deserves to be called a monster for enjoying taking a life, but he does not quite feel like one.

That same righteous part of him wants to call Hannibal a monster too, yet Will is enchanted by the man. Enchanted by his darkness that somehow feels more like home to Will than anywhere he has lived. Enchanted by his hands that have inflicted so much pain on Will but somehow still feel more intimate than anyone else's touch.

When Will opens his eyes, he sees that Hannibal has returned with a washcloth and a soft plush dressing gown, baby blue with gold patterns, probably hand-embroidered and costing more than Will's traitorous godforsaken car. He also sets a pair of slippers on the floor that Will immediately steps into, the velvety material caressing his bare toes.

"May I?" Hannibal asks.

Will nods absent-mindedly in response, too slow to realise what the question implies. When Hannibal starts to peel off his blood-soaked shirt from his body, Will cannot help but to gasp at the touch. Those hands. Capable of such cruelty, yet being so gentle in the moment. Even though he feels exposed, the cold air hugging the naked top half of his body, he feels comforted at the same time. He watches in a daze as Hannibal cleans off the blood on his chest with the cloth, discarding it on top of the shirt on the floor when he is finished.

"Refill?" Hannibal offers, breaking Will out of his trance, and motions towards the glass in his hand, empty once again.

“Please. Everything hurts.”

His body is still shivering. Not from being cold but rather from the built up tension. Whether it is from having Hannibal run his hands along his chest so delicately, or the fact that he stabbed a man in cold blood no more than half an hour ago, he is not sure.

He sinks into an armchair, expecting Hannibal to take the chair next to him after refilling his drink. Instead, Hannibal comes to stand behind him and places his hands on his shoulders, giving them one tentative squeeze. Will exhales and shifts to bring his body closer, inviting him to keep going.

The firm, soothing press of the fingers on his trapezius muscles feels relaxing, dissolving the rigidity in them. It makes him realise he probably pulled a muscle swinging those punches earlier, judging by the tugging pain under his shoulder blade. Somehow Hannibal seems to be able to find exactly where the tension is and relieve it. Will wonders if he secretly has a degree in physiotherapy too. He closes his eyes, relaxing under the touch, the combined efforts of the scotch inside and Hannibal's hands on the outside making him feel calm and warm.

“Better?” He hears Hannibal ask.

“Much.”

The fingers continue rubbing circles into the back of his neck, knuckles pressing into the top vertebrae, sending waves of pleasure down to the rest of his spine. One of the hands starts to massage his head, and Will tips it forward, chin to his chest, giving Hannibal better access. The fingers are getting tangled in his sleep-messed curls, pressing in just the right spots to relieve his headache. The touch is electrifying, bliss-inducing. And gone way too soon. Will exhales with a shudder, letting himself be pulled back on his feet.

Hannibal lifts his arms one by one, sliding them into the sleeves of the dressing gown, his hands oh-so-lightly brushing Will’s waist. Hannibal smooths down the fabric of the collar, palms running down Will’s chest, layering the sides of the gown one on top of another, fingers sweeping past Will’s hips as if by accident. A deliberate accident. Will’s breath hitches at the touch. This is different from the firm press of Hannibal’s hands on his shoulders just a few moments ago, way more unsure, testing the waters. And Will is not entirely certain of what is hiding in those waters.

And then Hannibal steps in closer, their foreheads almost touching, as he ties the sash around Will’s middle. Will swallows down the feelings that start brewing in his chest, threatening to spill from his mouth. He keeps his gaze safely resting on Hannibal’s shoulder, away from the man’s eyes. Being this close, close enough to press their lips together, feels like too much. He instinctively takes a step back, suddenly needing room to breathe and think.

“You aren't scared of me, are you, Will?”

Will knows the question is not about how close they are physically in the moment, but rather how closely they have come to know each other. How close Will is to turning the Chesapeake

Ripper in to the FBI, but instead choosing to become even more intimately acquainted than before, letting his violent desires intertwine with Hannibal's bloodlust.

"Not at all", he exhales.

"Then you shouldn't be scared of yourself either."

And Will is falling. Falling, plummeting and crashing.

If he can admit that he accepts Hannibal for the sinister man that he is, and desires him despite everything, why is it so hard for Will to admit that it is exactly the kind of man he wants himself to be too?

It all started at the Baltimore State Hospital, where he decided to open the room in his mind palace that had been previously sealed shut, and let the vengeful and bloodthirsty part of himself out to play. There were several impenetrable physical walls between him and the world, so his mental walls were no longer necessary. And when Will found out he was going to be released, he planned to leave that ugly part of himself in the cell, forever locked behind the bars, never to be seen or remembered again. Only something went wrong and what he left behind was the innocent, good-natured side of him, while the dark part escaped, settling to live just beneath his skin.

"Perhaps I shouldn't be", Will replies after what feels like an eternity.

"Tell me about it", Hannibal asks, eyes motioning towards the body on the floor.

"I couldn't stop. Didn't want to stop."

"Did it feel good?"

It did. But Will hesitates with his response.

"You already know the answer to that", he says after a few moments.

Not giving a straight answer seems infinitely easier than saying the truth out loud. Hannibal looks at him with curiosity, as usual, but a small impressed smile appears on his face.

"I see the appeal. Getting away with it with no consequence. No motive. No traces linking back to you. You see an opportunity and you take it."

When Hannibal words it like that, cold-blooded murder starts to sound casual and enticing. Almost morally acceptable.

"Is that why you killed Tobias Budge?"

"Yes. And Franklyn Froideveaux."

"Because you saw the opportunity", Will concludes. "Did it feel good?"

"You already know the answer to that."

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Seeing photos of gruesome murders spread across the table in the break room is not an unusual occurrence if you work at the Quantico BSU. Even more so since Penelope Rivas joined the team, always eager to shove the gory pictures into the faces of her coworkers that just want to eat their lunch in peace.

The stack of photos that she brought in this time depict a multitude of body parts and organs, cut or moulded into geometric shapes and arranged together into one big grotesque figure. Like a Tangram puzzle.

“Ew. The brain is always the nastiest”, Penelope says as she uncovers a close up photograph of the victim’s brain, sliced into two halves, both sewn into the Tangram shape.

Will shrugs, impatiently waiting for the microwave to finish heating his lunch, so he can escape the conversation under the pretence of needing to prepare for his next lecture.

“It takes a whole new level of monster to bash through the skull to get to the brain. Most killers wouldn’t bother”, she continues, mouth twisting in disgust.

“The Ripper is one of a kind”, Will mumbles, watching the seconds counting down on the microwave display.

He wonders how easy it would be to get away with scattering the brain around his next crime scene. It would be very tempting to leave a special gift for Penelope Rivas.

It took Price and Zeller just as long to assemble the Ripper victim’s body back into its original shape as it had taken Hannibal to cut it into pieces. It had taken all night, Hannibal whirring away with the electric saw and Will dutifully scrubbing the excess blood and viscera out of the way to keep the workstation clear. Eventually the missing liver was discovered, pointing Jack’s team in the direction of the Chesapeake Ripper.

“It must bother you a lot that you still haven’t caught him”, Penelope says, strategically positioning herself between Will and the microwave before it beeps to indicate his food is ready.

Her attempts at engaging Will in a conversation seem incessant, and he is beyond annoyed.

“It does”, he replies laconically, reaching past her to retrieve his meal.

He keeps his eyes on the plate, using every piece of body language he can think of to signal that he is not interested in talking, hoping Penelope leaves him alone. Upon a closer look, his home-cooked lunch looks suspiciously like *Fegato alla Veneziana,* Venetian liver. He thinks about how he is going to *strangle* Hannibal if he can taste even a hint of that missing liver in his meal. Will had agreed to Hannibal cooking for him under one condition: no human meat in his work lunches. Being exposed for cannibalism is the last thing he needs.

“You fantasise about killing him, don’t you?” Penelope presses on.

Will sighs in annoyance and turns to look at her. The question brings vivid memories to the forefront of his brain.

He remembers Hannibal in a straitjacket, suspended from the ceiling at the Verger estate; pictures himself slashing the man's throat, warm blood raining on his face, tasting like sweet vengeance. He remembers the forest, the ropes snaking around Hannibal's body, binding him to a tree; imagines himself whistling to the stag to wind the strands tighter around Hannibal's neck, ending with a hot burst of blood coating him, once again. Will does not think about his killing beloved anymore - today's speculations about the liver in his lunch aside - but the old fantasies are permanently burned into his eidetic memory.

"Yeah, I do."

Back when he still wanted the Ripper caught, he used to kill him in his imagination almost every day, so it makes sense to admit his fantasies. After all, he needs to maintain an appearance of someone who wants this murderer behind bars, possibly more than anyone else would.

"Of course. And does the mental image of him have a face?" she asks, casually leaning on the kitchenette counter. Her posture looks seemingly relaxed, but Will can sense her eyes watching him closely.

Her question makes him remember looking at the Wendigo in his dreams and hallucinations, staring into those white, soulless eyes, feeling like all joy and light have been sucked out of his life. The creature still haunts him in his nightmares sometimes, although it has nothing to do with Hannibal anymore.

"Yeah", he affirms, unsure if the involuntary shiver in his body is caused by Penelope's prodding or the mental image of the Wendigo.

As soon as the word rolls from his tongue, Will notices a change in her eyes. He sees a sudden spark, a speculating burn as she watches him with even more piercing attention than before.

"Every face has a name", Penelope says in a knowing voice.

Will struggles to conceal the shudder running through his body, even stronger than the previous one. He can tell exactly what she is implying. People with abilities like her and Will's would never fail to identify a face if they see one in their imagination when deconstructing a crime scene. The realisation sets in like a lump in his throat; she is undoubtedly taunting him with the idea that he is purposefully hiding the Ripper's identity. Will narrows his eyes at the thought.

It feels like they are playing cards, and she is bluffing - or maybe not. Either way, she has cards up her sleeve, and he has knives up his. He just hopes his poker face is going to carry him through the game.

"No, I don't know who he is, if that's what you're implying. If I knew, I would've killed him personally long ago", he responds, voice somewhere between a whisper and a hiss, carrying

enough resentment and determination to convince anyone.

“We’re all counting on you to do just that, Graham.”

And just like that, she sweeps past him and out of the room. Will is left standing there, unsure if it means he won this round, unsure if there even is a game, or if she is just making him think there is. The only thing he sure is about is that his *Fegato alla Veneziana* has gone cold again.

East-Southeast

Chapter Summary

"Got much planned for Valentine's?"

"Just a home-cooked *hearty* dinner."

Chapter Notes

In short, Hannibal gives Will a romantic themed murder tableau as a Valentine's day gift. Jack and the rest are clueless, as always.

The day after Will came clean to Jack about his medication, Hannibal is not surprised to find Jack initiating a confidential conversation with him under the pretence of a stroll in the park. He agrees, knowing exactly where this is going.

"I'm sorry for putting you in this position, Hannibal, I really am. I know I shouldn't be asking for your professional opinion on someone you're romantically involved with, but I need to know", Jack begins.

"No need to apologise. You only have Will's best interests in mind", Hannibal responds with a warm smile. Friendly professional advice has always been the defining trait of their friendship.

"He isn't taking his medication", Jack pauses for a moment, "but you probably knew that."

"Will and I have always been brutally honest with each other, for better or for worse."

Hannibal talks in his signature style; not admitting anything outright, but hinting enough for Jack to draw the desired conclusion.

"Is it safe for him to be in the field?" Jack asks.

"Will is experiencing nightmares and paranoia - the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder that are common for people in your line of work, but not indicative of a psychological anomaly. Apart from that, he is stable, more in touch with his true self than ever before."

Hannibal cannot help but drop hints about Will's nature that he knows Jack is not going to see. He is truly amused and entertained by how oblivious the man is sometimes.

“I am keeping a close eye on Will all the time, just in case. As you know, his well-being is my priority”, Hannibal continues, his words truly sincere for the first time in their conversation.

No ambiguous wording or dual meanings. With regard to his feelings towards Will, there has never been any ambiguity.

“Of course. It’s mine too, but I can’t look out for him if he keeps lying to me.”

“Will needs this work that he is doing for you. It’s his anchor. You are his anchor, Jack”, Hannibal explains, “He doesn't want you to worry that he's going to break, hence the white lies about being medicated. To convince you that he is well-adjusted. I must agree with you though, that wasn’t a smart decision on Will’s part.”

“He says he’s not going to break but I’m starting to see the cracks”, Jack states in his typical blunt way, not fully convinced by Hannibal’s reasoning for his beloved’s actions.

“How so?”

“Will’s insights about the crime scenes haven’t exactly been meeting my expectations. He’s an exceptionally gifted profiler, capable of catching someone like the Virginia Vigilante after the first couple of bodies. But the guy is still roaming loose. And don’t even get me started on the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal frowns, displeased to hear critique towards his lover. Of course Jack would notice sooner or later that Will seems to be unable to catch the Vigilante and the Ripper. But it is nothing Hannibal should be alarmed about. All he needs to do is simply assure Jack that Will’s behaviour is perfectly natural. A man like Jack needs a strong logical rationalisation, but perhaps appealing to his compassion towards Will by mentioning his traumatic past would not hurt. Hannibal loves compassion; an innate human quality that can serve as a powerful tool for manipulation, if used the right way.

“Last time Will got close to the Ripper, he got inside his head and framed him. So naturally, Will is cautious about delving right into the man’s psyche now. And the Vigilante seems to have no faith in the justice system; a mindset that feels personal to Will. Shared values like this can easily interfere with his ability to stay objective. We can’t blame him for having a blind spot when it comes to these two killers, Jack.”

Jack gives him an indiscernible hum in response. Even if Hannibal’s clever assurances had worked, he would not let it show right away.

“That's why we got agent Rivas.”

“To catch killers when they slip up? Or to catch Will when he slips up?” Hannibal asks, turning to look at Jack. A carefully worded question, aimed to find out if Jack’s motive for hiring a second profiler is something he and Will should consider a threat.

“Both.”

Jack's response is a brick wall. Hannibal would not have expected anything less. If Jack were suspecting Will of anything, Hannibal would not be the person he would tell about it. Obviously, since everybody knows that his loyalty and heart belong to Will.

"Will won't slip up", Hannibal promises in a warm tone.

Just like that, he is back to talking in dual meanings. He chooses his words so that they sound like reassurance about Will's safety and sanity. Just not in the way Jack is expecting. And Hannibal has no doubts about being able to keep his promise. Will never 'slips up' when it comes to crime scenes, regardless of which side of the law he is looking at them from.

Still, Hannibal's intuition tells him Penelope Rivas is someone they should always keep in their rearview mirror. And they should keep their foot on the accelerator, making sure they stay ahead enough, not giving her any chances to sneak into their blind spot.

"Let's hope so. Got much planned for Valentine's?" Jack asks, casually changing the subject after realising their conversation has reached a dead end.

"Just a home-cooked *hearty* dinner", Hannibal smiles at him, more dual meanings bouncing off his tongue with practically no conscious effort.

"Will's lucky to be dating a master chef."

Will is lucky indeed, and Hannibal considers himself just as lucky to be with him. He is truly and irreversibly committed to taking care of his cherished partner. Hannibal takes care of him in a mundane romantic kind of way, by bringing him coffee in bed or rubbing his shoulders after a tiring day of solving - or creating - murder cases. He even lets Will's dogs roam inside his house, ignoring the damage to his pristine furniture and polished floors.

As a man who is fond of the unorthodox, Hannibal also takes care of Will in unorthodox ways. Always has. His intentions were never to corrupt Will, but to be the catalyst to make the inevitable happen sooner. He started by spoiling Will with living and breathing gifts, like that sham burglar, letting him explore his violent nature in a safe, controlled environment.

He would have called it his little psychological experiment, motivated by his professional curiosity. However, Hannibal learned quite fast that his main motivation ended up being the overbearing need to help Will through the battle with his stubborn moral compass.

Just like a compass struggling to point out true north when there are strong magnets near it, Will's moral compass is spinning frantically, trying to locate the truth about who he is. In Hannibal's opinion, there are too many such magnets in his day-to-day life, influencing Will to abandon his own understanding of justice and accept the rigid standards set by society. Despite how much he wants to, he cannot push the magnets out of the way completely, as that would mean Will would lose his bearings. All he can do is bring Will out of their reach sometimes, so that he can navigate freely, without interference.

Considering that none of Hannibal's living and breathing gifts stayed alive for very long after being placed into Will's hands, it is clear which direction he is headed. It is only a matter of time until his moral compass finally finds its own true north.

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It feels strange to be at a public pool and smell the coppery scent of blood instead of the usual chlorine. Will stands at the edge of a small pool, looking down at the gruesome picture painted inside it. There is no water. In the middle of the tile floor, two victims have been laid out on their sides, facing each other. A young man and woman, naked bodies arranged into a tender embrace. Their skin is pale, blue-tinged and cold, all blood drained from their bodies and poured onto the floor of the pool, covering the tiles completely in a deep crimson shade.

The composition resembles a painting or a romantically intended greeting card, the blood being the red background, framed by the edges of the pool. The arrangement is complete with rose petals carefully placed on and around the two lifeless lovers in the middle.

Will gets lost staring. Normally he accompanies Hannibal on his human-hunting ventures, sometimes being a lookout for unwanted attention, sometimes assisting with the preparation and presentation of the body. Never anything major; they leave the execution of their respective kills to each other, only helping with minor details if asked to.

However, this time, Hannibal went alone, telling Will that he is preparing a Valentine's Day surprise for him. Will stands still for a good quarter of an hour, transfixed, until the investigators descend to the bottom of the pool to examine the bodies, ruining the breathtaking composition.

"The most revolting Valentine card in the world", Jack utters with disgust.

"Ironically, both victims' hearts are missing", Price comments from where he is crouched over the bodies, "more specifically, they've been carved out of their chests".

"The Chesapeake Ripper?" Penelope suggests.

"He ate up their love", Will echoes pensively. He can tell exactly which human organ will be the main ingredient of his dinner with Hannibal tonight. *Cuore di Bue sulla Brace*, or something like that.

"Aw, poor guy must be lonely", Zeller teases.

"It feels like he wants to express love rather than consume it", Penelope points out. Her ability to empathise with Hannibal's intent so precisely makes Will's skin tingle with uneasiness.

"Who would the Ripper be trying to pursue romantically?" Jack asks with a snort.

Penelope answers his question by pointing at Will with a knowing look. "I dare to say he did this with you in mind, Graham. An act of courtship."

Penelope is scarily right about what she can sense in Hannibal's work and who it is aimed at. Unnervingly, menacingly right. This murder tableau is a declaration of love. If her empathy skills can pinpoint the exact purpose and the recipient of the Valentine card, how much longer until she figures out the sender? The thought makes Will shudder, which he masks as being visibly uncomfortable with the killer's unsolicited courtship towards himself.

"Courtship? Hardly. Just his usual ridicule. Everything that the Ripper does is with me in mind", Will sighs, trying his hardest to make Penelope's words sound less like an alarmingly specific deduction and more like a broad guess. "He loves playing with me, knows I'm going to see every sick little gift he leaves me. Knows how *disgusted* I am."

"Well, you do swing mens' way, so can't blame the guy for trying", Zeller comments from the bottom of the pool where he is snapping photos of the ill-fated lovers.

"Yeah, but I don't swing killers' way", Will counters with an annoyed eye-roll.

"Good call, the boys on the right side of the law are far sexier. And have more handcuffs."

"You're a sick fuck, Zeller", Will laughs, taking off his rubber gloves and flinging them towards the man as he walks past.

He can hear Zeller's faintly protest that he is in fact a "spectacular fuck", but his mind is already preoccupied by something else.

Hannibal chose this specific pool to display his kills for a reason, and Will needs a moment to think about what it means. He sits on one of the benches by the wall, away from everyone, reinforcing his role as a man who is deeply embarrassed and disturbed by the romantic gestures from a serial killer. He does indeed feel disturbed in a way, but for a completely different reason.

Of course Hannibal would choose a location that has so much significance in their relationship. Will tells himself he does not regret manipulating Matthew Brown into organising the act of retribution that happened here. After all, Hannibal so insidiously broke his mind and shattered his sense of self. Now, Will is thankful for the way his plan had turned out, not how he had initially wanted to, but much better in the long run.

The entire time they have known each other they have communicated through actions that are symbolic of their feelings. Orchestrating Hannibal's predicament at this pool was Will's way of saying: *You take my sanity from me, I take your life from you.* Whereas, today's romantic murder tableau was Hannibal's way of responding: *This is where you tried to kill me, yet this is where declare my love for you.* Will finds himself almost tearing up under the weight of all the emotions surrounding this place.

Love. Devotion. Desperation. Forgiveness.

"Does this bother you?" Will is snapped back into reality by Penelope's question. It seems like she is always following him, like an annoying fly.

"Yeah."

“The Ripper is mocking your obsession with him, equates it to romance”, she says, “Like a teenage crush, he lives in your head and you can’t get rid of him.”

Will nods slowly, face contorted with feigned revulsion at the thought.

“You hate it when people try to get in your head, don’t you?”, she asks.

“Immensely.”

“Is that why you tried to have your old psychiatrist killed? Dr. Hannibal Lecter, right?”

Will turns to look at her, surprised at the unexpected question, using up every ounce of self-control to maintain a neutral expression. It feels like she can read his thoughts, see through his skull with her X-ray vision. No one but him, Hannibal, Jack and Alana knew that it was him who sent Matthew Brown after Hannibal. Hannibal had insisted that they keep it that way.

“Is that Freddie Lounds’s new article? Sorry, I don’t read Tattlecrime”, he replies, careful to not reveal anything with his words, voice or face.

“No one at Tattlecrime knows about this.”

Will feels the hairs on his arms become electrified with apprehension. It is not hard to guess which of the four of them leaked the secret. Jack and Penelope must be way better acquainted than he was aware of.

“It would be hard to forgive something like this”, Penelope continues before Will has the chance to think of his next ambiguous response.

“Hard but not impossible for a man like Hannibal”, he argues.

“How do you know?”

“How do I know? If he was still mad at me he wouldn’t be up early every morning to bring me coffee in bed and make me breakfast.”

She stares at him, confused.

“Hannibal and I have been dating for almost two years, Rivas”, Will explains slowly, sneering at the sudden look of shock and enlightenment on her face, “I’m surprised that whoever gave you your intel forgot to mention this fact.”

She gains her composure quickly.

“So you pick your partners based on which ones survive your murder attempt?”

A purposeful jab at his sore spot. He should have expected this for being a smartass. The words sting more than he wants to admit. Between Hannibal’s love declarations and Penelope’s prying questions, the feelings he thought he had dealt with long ago have

resurfaced. The sudden whirlwind of emotions inside him makes his head spin and clouds his vision.

Revenge. Anger. Regret. Guilt.

“I wasn’t myself, locked in a tiny cell, my brain inflamed and my mind broken. The Ripper’s ‘courtship’ as you call it and Hannibal’s advances blended together in my head and I started seeing them as one person, okay?”, he hisses, exasperation and hurt bubbling up from where Penelope’s words pricked him.

“If you’re going to humiliate me for the mistakes I made during my most vulnerable mental state, please get in line, after Freddie Lounds and half of the FBI Academy.”

Will storms off, not giving her a chance to respond.

South-East

Chapter Summary

Hannibal knows he can cultivate a killer. But can he cultivate a lover?

Chapter Notes

This chapter is basically a look on Will and Hannibal's relationship at the beginning vs present moment of Will's becoming. With some murderous Will added for good measure!

The next time Hannibal invites Will to accompany him on his human meat hunt, his chosen location is Wolf Trap, Virginia. Will killed a man in Hannibal's house, so it is only fair that he gets to kill someone on Will's property. There is no point to back down, now that they are up to their necks in witnessing each other's crimes. Will agrees to the proposition, but insists that he is only going to observe, not participate.

Hannibal is wrestling with his victim at the back of the shed behind Will's house. He is putting on a show, constantly aware of Will's intense gaze on him. Delilah Miller puts up a commendable fight; biting, clawing and kicking Hannibal the best she can. He is almost compelled to applaud her. When she draws her fist back, intending to land a punch in his face, he lets her, timing his attempt at dodging a second too late. As the knuckles collide with his nose, the hot and slick explosion of blood flows past his parted lips and down his throat, a dribble spilling down the side of his chin. Hannibal lets the woman believe that she has a chance to subdue him and possibly get away. It is more fun that way, both for him and his one-man audience.

He pushes her up against the wall and drives a knife into the flesh under her collarbone. Not with intent to injure, moreso for the dramatic effect. Spilling blood always pleases his hedonistic self. The woman screams in agony and Hannibal pauses momentarily to revel in the sound of it, the warmth of blood on his hands. That brief moment is all she needs. She swings the stiletto heel of her shoe into the side of Hannibal's head, knocking him off balance and onto the floor, as she bolts towards the door.

Hannibal takes his time laying on the floor, letting several minutes pass. He eventually rolls over in an unrushed fashion and gets up, straightening the crimson-stained plastic covering on top of his suit. He gently touches the bleeding indentation on his head, noticing just how much it is throbbing, and wondering if this injury ended up more serious than he had allowed for. Nevertheless, all of this is part of his design. Finally, he moves his gaze to where Will was

standing; outwardly refusing to participate but nevertheless strategically positioned himself between Hannibal and the door, to prevent the victim's escape if need be.

Both of them are now on the floor; Will on top, his hands around her throat. Hannibal watches the scene that seems to last an eternity. He watches her nails clawing desperately at every part of his body within reach, his iron grip remaining unfaltering, her grabbing his wrists and trying to wrench them away, his hands pressing down even tighter in response, her staring at him with terrified eyes, the eye contact not broken by a single blink, until he has squeezed every last drop of life out of her.

Such a beautiful, wonderful, exquisite sight. So divine that Hannibal wants to dedicate an entire room in his mind palace to it.

After a moment that feels endless, Will finally lets go and sits back on his knees, slowly lifting his eyes to meet Hannibal's. His face contorts with worry as he notices the blood droplets that fall from Hannibal's head and stain the floor.

"You're hurt."

There is concern in Will's voice. Something that Hannibal did not entirely expect, at least not as Will's immediate reaction to what just happened. He expected to see shock regarding having just killed someone, just like with the intruder at Hannibal's house. Then there would be that inadvertent wave of pleasure, power and euphoria that Will tries so desperately to run from. Then there would be the guilt, remorse and confusion at all these positive and satisfying emotions he felt after taking a life.

Concern for Hannibal's well-being would be there eventually - or so Hannibal hopes at least - but it would not be Will's primary focus.

However, it appears that Hannibal was wrong regarding the priority order of Will's emotions. This is a rather interesting observation. Yes, Hannibal is bleeding, but not in a life-threatening way that warrants immediate worry. He makes a mental note to explore this fascinating discovery about Will's priorities later.

"I feel fine, it's just a little blood", he replies reassuringly, "How about you, Will?"

Will opens his mouth but it seems that the words get stuck in his throat as the full awareness of his actions finally dawns on him.

"She hurt you. You didn't get up for what felt like forever. I couldn't let her —", he manages to sound out hesitantly, unsure if he is talking to Hannibal or himself.

Hannibal stays silent, giving Will time to process his thoughts. Here comes the internal battle he was expecting. Will gets lost in his head, trying to come up with an explanation for the gruesome act he just committed. There is no need for him to defend his actions to Hannibal, nor to himself, but the poor man is determined to hang tight to his noble morals. Will is tormenting himself, forcing himself to justify the killing, even though deep inside he has admitted to himself long ago that the only justification that really matters is that he simply enjoyed it.

“Delilah was facing the inevitable anyway, whether it would be me or you that sealed her fate”, Hannibal says after a long moment, providing the reassurance he knows Will desperately needs.

Will is now trembling as a result of the adrenaline in his system fading away, but his voice does not waver. A pleasant development since the last time Hannibal watched him kill. It is evident that he has lost the fight against the bloodthirsty self-indulgent part of himself - those noble morals he has been clinging to have clearly been corrupted. Yet, Will continues to be stubborn.

“I was supposed to observe, not interfere with your design.”

“You did exactly what was needed, my dear Will. It is always a delight to watch you do what you do best.”

Before Will has a chance to object, undoubtedly wanting to argue that killing is not *what he does best, another large trickle of blood rolls down the side of Hannibal’s temple and drops onto the floor. The sight distracts Will from his thoughts and he frowns at the blood stain. He stands up and closes the distance between them, lifting his hands to Hannibal’s head.*

His fingers brush the hair out of the way so he can assess the wound on the scalp, moving with assertive and clinical precision. Way too clinical for Hannibal’s liking. He closes his eyes, relishing in the contact regardless, and notices that Will’s fingers are not trembling anymore.

Hannibal cannot help but to drink up the result of their work together. He looks at the lifeless body a few metres from them, another milestone in Will’s journey of self-discovery. And with every milestone, there is less hesitation and more confidence, less remorse and more indulgence. It is the indulgence that is so attractive and intoxicating to Hannibal. He inhales the scent of the sweat and endorphins on Will’s neck, gaze fixated on where a few buttons of his shirt have come undone, exposing his flawlessly-shaped collarbones.

Hannibal wants to touch them, kiss them, lick them, anything. But he has to restrain himself. Not because he has cold feet, but because he needs to be careful. For a reason. Showing any kind of affection besides platonic, especially when he is not sure it will be reciprocated, would be reckless.

Hannibal knows better than to open his heart to anyone. And especially not to an intelligent empath with a taste for violence and manipulation. An empath who sure as hell has a personal vendetta against Hannibal, after the atrocities Hannibal did to him. If Will saw even the tiniest spark of romantic fondness in Hannibal’s actions, he would use it to get inside his head, discover all of his thoughts and feelings, fears and adoration. And he would annihilate Hannibal from within, in the way he does best - set his heart on fire and let him choke on the unrequited affection, watch his feelings for Will be the very cause of his downfall.

However, the way Will’s hand is caressing his hair, gently dabbing away the blood, makes Hannibal think that perhaps Will reciprocates his affection, somewhere deep within. Perhaps, behind all those mental forts there is an innate fondness for Hannibal. Just like there was an innate killer instinct behind those forts. And the fact that he was able to unlock this instinct

inside Will, making him kill for Hannibal, *is filling Hannibal with exhilaration at the possibilities.*

He knows he can cultivate a killer. But can he cultivate a lover?

"I don't think you're going to need stitches", Will announces his verdict, detaching his fingers from Hannibal's hair.

"Good. Being hit with a stiletto was not on my agenda today", Hannibal admits, only half untruthful, "but I am glad it's not going to hinder the rest of our plans for the evening."

" Our *plans?" Will echoes, emphasis on the first word.*

"Well, since you have made the choice to be an active participant in my project today, it is only fair that you honour your commitment until the end", Hannibal speaks, keeping his tone nonchalant but studying Will's reaction carefully. "I would like you to assist me with the presentation of the body."

Will swallows down his sudden uneasiness and nods slowly in agreement. Hannibal moves to the table where he has laid out his surgical tools and other necessary equipment, and motions for Will to join.

"We're going to separate all of the skin from the body. The strips of skin will be stitched together to form a pouch. A chrysalis, if you like. We will then envelope the rest of the body in it and sew it shut."

"Like a caterpillar's skin detaching from its body to form a cocoon around it?" Will elaborates, the image of the finalised murder tableau already starting to form in his imagination.

"Precisely. A caterpillar must face its end to give way to the butterfly. A sacrifice is required for one to achieve his final form."

It takes a while before Will is hit with the realisation that the butterfly in the analogy is him, not the woman he killed. Hannibal observes with unrestrained curiosity as Will digests the meaning of this analogy. All the gruesome sacrifices are necessary stepping stones for his ascend towards his true nature. As his moral compass shifts towards the new direction, Will decides that he is not as disturbed by the trajectory of his becoming as he thought he would be.

This evening has unfolded exactly how Hannibal had planned, and Will has reacted exactly like he was expected to.

Such a beautiful, wonderful, exquisite sight.

***

It is one of those evenings that they spend in bed, getting lost in each other's bodies and forgetting about the champagne on the bedside table. The pillow talk is almost always about their 'schedules' and 'plans' for the upcoming week. The schedules being daytime work, and plans being their hobbies of the more violent nature. Whenever their respective human targets become the topic of a bedtime conversation, it is light-hearted and casual, as if they were discussing what movie to watch next. The detailed planning and preparation belongs in Hannibal's basement, never the bedroom.

"Your tableau at the pool was stunning. The most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me. In all it's gruesomeness", Will hums with a content smile on his lips.

His head is resting on Hannibal's chest, the older man's fingers moving idly through the brown curls, drawing patterns on the scalp.

"I'm pleased to hear that you loved it", Hannibal responds, his other hand reaching for those forgotten champagne glasses.

He had prepared champagne and truffles for them to enjoy tonight, but was promptly distracted by the sight of Will emerging from the shower with nothing but a towel around his hips. The champagne has gotten warm by now, but Hannibal does not mind - devouring his lover's ethereal body is his favourite delicacy.

"Penelope Rivas thinks the Ripper is courting me."

"He most certainly is", Hannibal confirms. He emphasises his words by sliding a truffle into Will's mouth.

The new FBI profiler has been on Hannibal's mind ever since Will first told him about her. The thought of her has been gnawing at him under all his layers of confidence, impeccable self-control and emotional indifference. He is uncertain if his apprehension regarding Penelope Rivas is a product of his unnecessary paranoia or rather his accurate intuition. And if Hannibal hates anything, it is uncertainty.

There is no way he is going to allow one pesky FBI profiler ruin what he and Will have built. Not for as long as Hannibal is in control of everything that happens.

"Should we have agent Rivas for dinner some time?" he asks Will, "Reassure her that you are very happy with me and definitely aren't interested in reciprocating the advances of some lousy *serial killer*?"

Will laughs at the ridiculousness of the statement, twirling the piece of chocolate around his tongue. Hannibal chuckles along with him. He is serious about getting to personally know Penelope Rivas, though. He needs to be able to see and talk to her directly in order to be in control.

"Tempting, but Rivas and I are barely on friendly terms", Will objects.

"Should we *have her for dinner* then?"

An entirely different question this time.

Hannibal has to ask. He has to know how much of a threat Will thinks she is. Will's judgement is his best gauge for now, since Hannibal has not been able to meet Penelope in person and assess the level of potential danger himself yet.

"I don't want to kill her", Will responds casually, with a yawn.

Hannibal always respects Will's judgement and decisions regarding matters like this. Always. The days of him whispering murder into Will's ear are over. Will makes his own choices about who gets to die by his hand. He keeps a list of names and plans in his mind, a figurative equivalent to Hannibal's rolodex.

"Penelope isn't a bad person. She just gives me a headache", Will elaborates.

Hannibal wants to point out that what starts with a simple headache can quickly turn into a fatal brain disease. *If it is not taken care of in time*. But he refrains from saying anything, because he respects Will's judgement. And if Will does not consider her a threat, Hannibal should have nothing to worry about.

"Is she infuriatingly perceptive?" he asks instead.

"Yeah. But I can handle it."

"Of course you can, dear", he hears himself say instinctively.

He should have nothing to worry about, but the tension lurking in his chest and echoing in his fingers and toes is exactly what any medical or psychiatric specialist would label as worry. Hannibal stretches a hand across his face to rub both his temples simultaneously - a well-rehearsed gesture to deliberately hide his eyes for a few seconds. A seemingly casual movement aimed to give an illusion of maintained control, for the moments when the control temporarily slips out of his firm grasp.

And when he lowers his hand and meets Will's eyes, his expression is back to being perfectly poised and untroubled. Only Will looks back at him, seeing right through everything. Just like he always has, no matter how many elaborate tricks Hannibal used to blind him.

"What's bothering you?" Will asks.

"I'm just feeling tired. My 5pm patient was exhausting. You know, the one who's convinced her neighbour killed someone. She says she knows a murderer when she sees one, which is highly ironic considering —"

"*Hannibal*."

"Yes, my love?" he responds, with his best attempt at sounding clueless and innocent.

He is not lying about Mrs. Fischer, his patient, per se, but rather using it as a distraction from the fact that his mind is saturated with unconstructive apprehensiveness. It is unconstructive because he has no doubts about Will's ability to watch everyone and everything at the FBI

and make sure no one comes close to discovering them. Will, with his calculating mind, observant eyes and impeccable people-reading skills, would never make a mistake that would put them at risk. Never.

Hannibal's confidence in his partner in crime and in life has always been unfaltering. He is simply apprehensive about the new player in the game. Agent Rivas has the potential to completely change their game field, introduce new battle strategies and unique weapons. But there is no way Hannibal can say these thoughts out loud without it sounding like he is doubting Will's ability to maintain appearances. Which is why he decides to avoid the topic altogether.

If only Will were as easy to fool as everyone else.

"Hannibal. *Talk. To. Me*", he demands, but his tone is gentle.

Gentle like the fingertips he is running down Hannibal's temple, following the curve of his cheekbone. And Hannibal has no choice but to comply. Refusing to be honest with Will is not what he wants to do, not at all. He simply does not want to alarm his beloved and cause him unnecessary stress by talking about his unfounded concerns.

"I tried asking Jack about Agent Rivas, but he's acting like a brick wall. And there's no need for walls unless you've got something to hide", Hannibal starts off delicately.

"You suspect she and Jack are playing games with us."

"Quite possibly."

"And you're worried that I'm going to crack under their combined pressure."

There it is, the topic Hannibal has been trying his hardest to avoid. Because he truly should have nothing to worry about. Will can handle himself under pressure; the possibility of him making a mistake should never even be questioned.

Hannibal pauses and readjusts his position on the pillows, so Will can see him properly, see the absolute sincerity shining through every atom of his body. He prepares to launch into his well-thought out lengthy words of reassurance; that he could never doubt Will, that he knows for certain all his worries are nonsensical because they have done this countless times before, gotten away with murder - literally - with no one suspecting a thing.

"I don't doubt your ability to maintain facades, Will. Not in the slightest. Please don't ever think that."

"Good", Will says simply, before Hannibal can get any more words out.

Hannibal blinks at him. Was that it? He expected to see a frown on Will's face, perhaps even skepticism towards Hannibal's words, since he had made it painfully obvious that he is riddled with doubt and uncertainty. But Will remains tranquil, fingers still caressing the side of Hannibal's head. He does not look annoyed or bothered. He just looks like he *understands*
.

“It’s about control, isn’t it? You’re not worried about me messing up, you’re worried because you can’t get to Rivas directly, and Jack is dodging your questions. Because you’re not in control.”

Control. Of course. It is not the anxiety or the uncertainty that makes his hands tremble with tension, it’s the notion of not having everything and everyone in his firm, controlling grasp.

This is it, the elaborate jumble of Hannibal’s thoughts presented as one neat phrase. This is what Will does. The contents of Hannibal’s mind are often so convoluted that they become ciphers and anagrams. And Will is the cryptographer, the only man who has been granted the key to solve the code. He deciphers the ideas and feelings in Hannibal’s head and rearranges them so they make sense. There is no one that knows Hannibal the way Will does.

Most people see Hannibal’s facades of self-restraint, poise and morale. Some people see more than that, the abominable monster that he is. And Will sees even more than that, the *human* that Hannibal is. Will sees his thoughts and emotions, fears and passions; he sees everything.

When Hannibal opened his heart to Will, he also bared the deepest contents of his mind for Will to see. And Will is not afraid. Will does not judge. Will sees all of Hannibal’s complex self and treats it like a multifaceted diamond, his own precious jewel that he loves. And that is why Hannibal loves him back.

“Would it put your mind at ease if I stopped crossing the names off my list for a while? See what we’re up against before making our next move?” Will asks him.

He brushes strands of Hannibal’s hair from his temple oh-so-delicately, tucking it behind his ear. The touch feels soothing, like warm fire, and Hannibal wants to melt into it like a wax candle.

“It would be wise. After next week’s one though”, he suggests. “I know you’ve been preparing for months, and another opportunity might not come. The real crime would be extending the man’s expiration date for any longer than it already has been.”

Hannibal knows Will hates the man’s guts, even though he has never met him. Reading the reports about the abductions and sex trafficking is enough to fire up his empathy for the victims.

“Indeed. What else can I do to ease your mind then?” Will murmurs, replacing his fingertips on Hannibal’s temple with his lips, softly kissing down his jawline.

Hannibal takes his time to enjoy the sensation while he thinks about the question.

“Can you talk to Jack for me? See if you can get more answers out of him than I could. You have the kind of emotional leverage on him that I don’t.”

“Of course. I’ll play the jail card, the guilt trip, the broken teacup crap. Anything to get us answers.”

“My cunning boy”, Hannibal chuckles as he leans forward to wipe the leftover chocolate off of Will’s lips with his own.

South-Southeast

Chapter Summary

Hannibal is still pretending to have control, as if kissing the one man that has the power to ruin his carefully-crafted life is all part of the plan. But he knows that they are both way out of their depth, clinging to each other like buoys in the water, trying to keep their heads above the surface.

Chapter Notes

The flashback scene in this chapter is kinda long but there's a reward at the end!!

The only person that could storm into Jack Crawford's office without knocking and get away with it is Will Graham. And Will Graham is very aware of the privilege, using it only when absolutely necessary.

"We need to talk", he announces, coming to a stall in the middle of the room. "About Penelope Rivas."

Jack is visibly annoyed at the audacity but sighs and pushes away the papers on his desk, meeting Will's eyes expectantly.

"Did you hire her because I lied to you about the meds? Do you think I can't be trusted?" Will asks bluntly.

"It's not about that." Jack's voice sounds reassuring but the expression on his face is unreadable.

"Then why did you tell her that it was me who sent Matthew Brown after Hannibal? You, me, Hannibal and Alana had an agreement", Will pushes, openly bitter at Jack's betrayal.

"Anyone can figure out who sent Brown, it's almost painstakingly obvious."

"Why can't you put this past us? Hannibal has", Will counters, sticking out his metaphorical foot to guilt trip Jack with.

Instead, Jack simply gives him a worn-out look. Like a father who has discovered another of his son's nasty shenanigans, but is too tired to scold him for it. Will's eyes narrow. He knows Jack can be good at deceiving, playing the game Will is all too familiar with.

He crosses the room in a few bold steps and stops right in front of Jack's desk, fingers gripping the edge, leaning forward and looming over Jack in his chair.

"You hired her to investigate me. To see if I would try to kill again, this time myself."

"No. I hired her to protect you", Jack replies calmly, unbothered by Will's provocative stance. The sincerity in his voice is believable. Then again, Will knows from personal experience that such sincerity is not so difficult to feign.

If he were Jack, he would without a doubt consider himself as a potential suspect for the Virginia Vigilante murders. Not enough to warrant investigation, but as a fleeting thought at the very least. Jack knows that correcting injustice is achingly personal to Will, and that he has shown to be capable of murder by proxy. Besides, he recently caught Will lying about taking medication. Jack also knows that Will would be smart enough not to leave any evidence and would not crack under pressure. Certainly not under Jack's pressure.

He wonders if Jack had asked Penelope to try to get under his skin, intimidate him with her empathy skills and provocative questions about what he is hiding. Jack is clever and well-versed in mind games, so Will would not put it past him. Unfortunately for Jack, Will is well-versed in mind games too.

"Protect me?", he scoffs, "You think I'm unstable, damaged beyond repair, a serial killer in the making". He points at Jack in an accusatory way, voice laced with the right amount of scepticism and hurt.

"No, it's because I pushed you too far last time, and I can't let it happen again. I can't keep asking so much of you", Jack explains, his tone sincere and regretful, "I thought that with the two of you working at the scenes and sharing the emotional impact, it wouldn't break you."

Jack's logic seems bulletproof, perhaps even fully genuine. If Will has to resort to emotional manipulation to wring the truth out of him, then he will.

"I'm not good enough for you, am I? Too fragile to do my job. Incompetent. Needing Penelope fucking Rivas to hold my hand through it? And you're too nice to give me a formal redundancy notice because you're my friend. My *only* friend."

"Will..." Jack sighs, disappointment evident in his features, "To be honest, it hurts that you're hinting that I've got some ulterior motive."

Whether Jack is playing mind games or not, Will realises that he is nearing a dangerous territory where one more insensitive push would put a lasting dent on their friendship. Will cannot afford to ruin what he has with Jack. Apart from the usual benefits that come with friendships, it acts as an additional deterrent to Jack discovering the truth about Will and his alter ego.

"I asked you to be honest with me, Will. And I'm being nothing but honest with you in return."

"Alright. I believe you", Will responds.

He decides to retreat and give Jack the benefit of the doubt. For now.

***

Hannibal is pleased that Will accepted his invitation to dinner, following the events at the shed behind Will's house. It feels right to share the meal with him, since they shared the kill. They are sitting at the table, both finished their Boeuf Bourguignon, nursing the last ounces of Cabernet Sauvignon in their glasses. Will had told him more than once that he wants answers. Tonight, Hannibal wants answers of his own.

"I'd like to offer you a deal, Will. I will answer one of your questions if you answer one of mine."

Will's eyes light up at the words. Hannibal guesses that Will never expected to get an opportunity to ask his questions directly. Questions about why Hannibal did what he did to Will. Even if Will asked anyway, Hannibal would not give straightforward answers, never outright confess to anything. What Will expects is to have to piece his answers together from small hints Hannibal allows here and there.

"Sure", Will responds, trying to contain his excitement.

"Please proceed then."

Will's expression of enthusiasm changes to something more troubled as he swallows hard. He pauses for a moment under Hannibal's expectant gaze.

"Why did you frame me for the Copycat murders?" he finally asks.

The words echo in the otherwise silent room. They bounce off the walls and make the atmosphere feel disarming; stripping off their facades of politeness and indifference, shattering the armor of mental forts, exposing the vulnerabilities they learned to hide from each other so well.

"An act of self-defense", Hannibal replies simply.

Something sharp flashes in Will's eyes, like a ray of light reflecting off a blade.

"That's a fake excuse and you know it."

And just like that, the armor is back.

"Yes, it is", Hannibal admits without missing a beat. "The same fake excuse you keep using to justify your own cruelty towards other human beings."

Will raises an eyebrow skeptically, so Hannibal continues.

“Self-defense was not warranted when you stabbed a man in my living room. Nor was it necessary when you killed Delilah Miller.”

Will takes a long sip of his wine instead of responding. Hannibal can tell it is because Will does not have anything to say. Because he knows Hannibal is right.

“If you keep excusing your violence with self-defense to avoid having to face your changed moral compass, you’re never going to get the answers you so desperately seek.”

Will swallows the remainder of the wine. His expression is neutral, but there is a fierce internal battle happening inside his head. The battle against Will’s moral compass that has shifted, pointing him to a different direction. Will, being so stubborn and righteous, does not want to accept the new course, pretends to still fight it, even though he knows he does not want to.

“You didn't answer my question”, he accuses, annoyed that Hannibal diverted the conversation back to the unpleasant discussions of Will’s morality. “You didn't answer honestly*.”*

Hannibal smiles in a complacent fashion and tilts his head, proudly admitting his fault. He has every intention to be honest. Being honest has never stopped him from furthering his agenda before.

“Fine, let me rephrase. My decision to frame you was not exactly self-defense, but another survival instinct. The protective instinct, one might say. The innate mechanism that propels us into action when someone we care deeply for is about to get hurt.”

Will’s eyebrows rise again, both of them this time, indicating just how ridiculous he thinks Hannibal’s statement is.

“You didn’t want me to get hurt, so you put me through hell instead? *” Will asks slowly, voice drenched in bitterness and disbelief.*

“Yes. To protect you from me. And me from you.”

There is reciprocity in all of Hannibal’s actions when it comes to Will. An attack that is also a defense. An act of compassion that is also an act of vulnerability. It is the price of seeing him as Hannibal’s equal.

Will scoffs. “You only care about protecting yourself.”

“If that was the case, I would have killed you long ago.”

Will tilts his head to the side and gnaws at his bottom lip, his features contorting with concentration, as he thinks about the words for a moment.

“But you didn’t”, he agrees eventually, “because you want me around.”

Will is right, how could Hannibal not? How could he resist a man whose physique is just as gorgeous as his brain is fascinating?

People would call Hannibal a monster, but he knows he is not. He is human, with typical human-like weaknesses. Particularly, the weakness in the shape of a heart. Hannibal knows about the dangers of taking a liking to someone. The risks are immense, but the reward is twice as enticing. Impossible to ignore. It is a game, and he cannot win if he does not play. And Hannibal Lecter likes to win.

The stakes are high. Will's ability to empathise with the worst specimens of humanity - not that Hannibal considers himself one - can be a powerful weapon, if used with destructive intent. This empathy would immediately recognise the emotions Hannibal never allowed himself to have, until now. Namely, the maddening, dangerous, overwhelming affection he feels for Will.

Hannibal tells himself that he is in control, intentionally showing his feelings to Will to let the man believe he can win. That Hannibal is willingly opening his heart and allowing Will in, with the intention to earn his trust and loyalty. That he purposefully leaves his person suit partially unzipped to allow a connection with someone who is equally unperson. He tells himself it is deliberate, another act of manipulation to disarm Will.

But maybe, just maybe, that control Hannibal thought he had got lost somewhere along the way. Maybe, his intentions to be honest got the best of him.

Hannibal purses his lips at the thought. He studies the man in front of him for a while, calculating his next move. He then downs the remainder of his wine, setting the empty glass on the table, eyes never leaving Will's as he speaks.

"My turn. You were so adamant about not participating in Delilah's death. What made you kill her?"

"She was about to escape", Will says with a shrug.

"Hardly", Hannibal counters, "You demanded honesty from me, so I expect you to return the courtesy."

Will sighs and rubs the back of his neck. He knows there is strength in knowing the truth about his motivations, but admitting them out loud means lowering his weapons.

"Fine. The protective instinct."

The innate mechanism that propels us into action when someone we care deeply for is about to get hurt, *Hannibal completes the sentence internally.*

"And why is that?" he presses on.

"Because I want you around", Will replies slowly, echoing the response he gave Hannibal previously.

Hannibal nods, pleased at the confession. He rises to his feet, circles around to Will's side of the table in a leisurely but purposeful manner and comes to stand in front of him. His fingertips touch the side of Will's face ever-so-gently.

“It appears that our questions to each other have the same answer. We both commit horrible acts and justify them by wanting each other around. What does that mean, Will?”

Will stays silent, not shying away from the hand caressing his cheekbone, but not reciprocating the touch in any way either. He knows this is a game, and he can play it just as well as Hannibal.

“I wouldn’t have a clue”, Will drawls, the content of his words the complete opposite of his tone of voice. “Isn’t it your job, doctor, to provide me with answers?”

Hannibal stifles an annoyed groan before it escapes from his mouth, displeased at being provoked in such a way. But he would have expected nothing less from Will. The same Will that had wriggled his way into being seen as Hannibal’s equal. The same Will that is now using their equal standing to gain the upper hand. Of course he is going to resist Hannibal’s advances up until the last moment, playing clueless, forcing Hannibal to be the first to take the big leap they both know is coming.

Hannibal cups Will’s cheek, runs fingers across his lip. Will stays silent, not giving him the satisfaction of a response. His mask of total obliviousness is betrayed only by the slightest twitch of his mouth, curling into a knowing smirk, so subtle it is almost unnoticeable. Will is baiting Hannibal, making him take the plunge, and then what?

Is he going to reject and humiliate Hannibal for revealing his feelings, basking in the knowledge that he broke Hannibal’s heart, just like Hannibal broke his mind? Or is he going to give into his own desires and reciprocate, binding their bodies and souls together even tighter than they already are? Hannibal will never know, until he takes the leap.

“You say we want each other around. That’s a bold assumption to make. You have to substantiate your claim, Doctor Lecter”, Will challenges smugly, using Hannibal’s title in an almost mocking way.

Will’s aquamarine eyes change to a deep shade of cunning, showing just how much he is revelling in the power he has over Hannibal in the moment. Hannibal decides to entertain that illusion, sweetening it with a smile. Not the polite smile he wears every day, but one that shows his teeth.

Because it is who he is; a predator, a shark that follows a scent of blood in the water. And Will is the fishing lure. A beautiful burst of colour in the dull dark waters, a handsome face and unique mind, impossible to resist. Hannibal knows that all lures are designed to be a trap, of course. If he got close enough to Will, there would be a sharp hook that would go straight for his heart. Piercing right through and holding him in a firm grip, forcing him to follow every whim of the fisherman. Sharks of his caliber should not be interested in a simple lure, yet Hannibal knows he cannot resist the temptation to bite.

“You can try to hide behind your words, but the way your body is responding to my advances provides enough substance for my claim”, Hannibal notes with a knowing smile.

Will tries to object, but what has been once revealed cannot be hidden again.

Dilated pupils. Elevated pulse. Parted lips. Muscles working their hardest to resist leaning into the touch of Hannibal's hand.

Hannibal knows his way around human bodies just as well as around human minds. Like a skilled doctor, he can take one glance at the symptoms and provide the precise diagnosis; Will's heart is diseased in the most beautiful way, because it beats in sync with Hannibal's. With that confirmation in mind, he takes the leap.

His movements are feather-light and probing. Like a rodent gently nibbling on the piece of cheese in a mousetrap, scared to press too hard and trigger the spring. Like a cautious fish, or a shark in his case, mouthing at the bait, wary of the hook hiding beneath. The touch is barely there, but they both feel it; the delicate brush of Hannibal's lips on Will's.

A few seconds pass.

Hannibal pauses and freezes, for the first time ever feeling like prey, wondering if he made the wrong move.

Then Will lunges out of his chair and clashes their mouths together. His hands curl around the lapels of the navy-blue suit, using the leverage to push Hannibal backwards but simultaneously pulling his own body close. The motion sends them stumbling in a haphazard cadence of steps, only coming to a halt when Hannibal's back meets the wall behind him. He is taken aback, his perfect composure betrayed by the sharp inhale that he fails to conceal when Will's chest presses against his. Hannibal kisses back, catching Will's bottom lip between his teeth and biting down just the slightest. Establishing dominance? Succumbing to his own desires? He is not sure. Whatever it is, it feels right.

When their eyes meet again, he gives Will a pleased smirk.

"It appears that my claim has been substantiated, dear Will."

Will's lips spell out a heartfelt 'shut up' in response, but the words are muffled when Hannibal resumes their kiss. His mouth is not probing this time, but exploring this unexpectedly delightful turn of events with more confidence, staking out the new horizons, claiming his territory. Except that Will refuses to be claimed, so he retaliates with teeth. Hannibal bares his own fangs in return; canines clash with incisors, scraping tongues, biting lips, almost drawing blood.

It is exactly what Hannibal imagined. Not shy and timid gestures of romance but diving headfirst into the deep sea of raw hunger. Hannibal is still pretending to have control, as if kissing the one man that has the power to ruin his carefully-crafted life is all part of the plan. But he knows that they are both way out of their depth, clinging to each other like buoys in the water, trying to keep their heads above the surface.

Or maybe trying to drown each other.

With Will, there is duality in everything. And for that exact reason, with Will, there is no winning.

Hannibal likes winning, likes having control. But the way their bodies melt into each other is beyond the limits of art, the way Will's hands electrify all his nerve endings is beyond the limits of science. And the way Will's lips feel is ethereal, beyond the limits of heaven and hell and all things known to mankind.

Maybe just this once, there are benefits in giving up control. Maybe the reward Hannibal needs can be obtained not by winning, but by losing the game. Having Will so close sets off fireworks inside his body, soul and mind. And for the first time in years, Hannibal's brain willingly surrenders the reins to his heart.

South

Chapter Summary

> “So you’re saying the only difference between you and Dexter is the job title?” Penelope asks in a joking tone, but Will can hear a hint of something else in it.
>
> “Well, *obviously* I’m not a serial killer”, he replies, like he is indeed stating the obvious.

Chapter Notes

> Whoever wanted more Dexter references, you're welcome!

This morning, the seagulls on the beach are shrieking exceptionally loud. There is a feast for them, after all. A fresh, mutilated human body.

The corpse is skillfully bent into the form of a ship, deliberately placed on the sand by the water, as if it has been washed ashore. The dead man is laying on his stomach, his torso representing the hull of the ship. A wooden pole is stuck through his body, making the main mast. The man’s arms and legs are tied to the top of the mast, similar to a hog-tied position. It looks like certain bones have been purposefully broken so they can be pulled back and secured to the mast at correct angles. The skin and flesh on the limbs is pierced, and coil woven through the holes, to hold the sails in place. The man’s head serves as the figurehead at the bow of the ship, grimacing in terror.

“A journey by sea into the afterlife”, Will speaks, concluding his analysis of the chilling murder tableau.

“You’re good at this”, Penelope comments, coming to stand by his side.

Will shrugs coldly, still bitter from their tension-filled exchange at the Valentine’s crime scene, which had ended with Will walking out of the building in frustration.

“Look, I’m sorry about what I said the other day at the pool. I overstepped”, she says, as if she can hear his thoughts.

“It’s fine.”

Will’s reply is polite more than actually sincere, but it is what he has to say for the unwanted conversation to end. He knows he should stop sulking. Penelope sounds like she is genuinely

trying to make amends. Continuing to be bitter would only create unnecessary tension. Today, Will just wants to do his job and go home.

Penelope opens her mouth to say something, but she is interrupted by Price loudly announcing that he is going to fetch coffees for everybody. Will is thankful about this distraction and requests a large long black, double shot, no sugar. He is exhausted from the night of hard work.

Even though he took a long hot shower last night after finishing his creation, his bones are still aching from being exposed to the chilling wind for hours, while he assembled the pieces of the human-boat hybrid. He is probably going to catch a cold from this, but the satisfaction he got from killing and mutilating this ruthless sex trafficker was worth it. He should have accepted the hot tea that Hannibal had so thoughtfully brought with them to the beach, but the adrenaline of the kill was coursing through his veins and keeping him warm at the time.

Price is back in no time, handing the investigators their respective coffee orders. He stops next to where Will and Penelope are standing, shooting an evaluative glance at the body.

“Don’t get me wrong, this display is sickening, but I’ve got to admire the creativity and commitment. Credit where it's due”, Price chuckles.

“Thank you”, Will responds absent-mindedly, eyes still on the gruesome murder tableau.

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Penelope’s head turns sharply to look at him in disbelief. Will can feel the gaze before he even sees it.

“... for the coffee. Thank you for the coffee”, he explains with an eye roll and motions towards his hand that he has been holding out for the paper cup in Price’s grip.

“Oh, that totally sounded like you were taking credit for the murder, Graham”, Price laughs, glancing at Zeller, who looks back at Price with an amused grin. The two men launch into their usual back-and-forth dialogue, finishing each other’s sentences like an old married couple.

“- You so did this, didn’t you Graham? -”

“- I mean, come on, this guy’s been made into a fucking boat -”

“- And you fix boats in your spare time right? -”

“- You’re totally the Dexter Morgan of our unit -”

“I’m a criminal profiler, not a blood spatter analyst”, Will interrupts their quarrel with a small laugh.

“So you’re saying the only difference between you and Dexter is the job title?” Penelope asks in a joking tone, but Will can hear a hint of something else in it.

“Well, *obviously* I’m not a serial killer”, he replies, like he is indeed stating the obvious.

“Yeah. Obviously. Like the judge said, cleared of all charges”, Price confirms.

“Obviously”, Penelope echoes pensively.

They watch in silence as Price and Zeller join the rest of the investigators to inspect the body, take photos, look for fingerprints - all the components of a typical crime scene analysis.

“So, Dexter, huh?” Penelope resumes their conversation.

“Oh, yes, my secret twin. Childhood trauma, skewed morality and all that”, Will responds with friendly sarcasm, “What about you? What fictional character would you be?”

She thinks for a minute.

“Eric Draven maybe. But not quite undead or having supernatural powers, unless empathising with killers counts as one.”

Will has to remind himself of the plot of *The Crow* to make the necessary inference.

“Avenging your significant other who suffered a wrongful fate”, he deduces eventually. That explains why she is so passionate about law enforcement. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. It was 6 years ago, an undercover operation that turned fatal”, she elaborates, looking out into the sea, “I know it wasn’t my fault but I still feel responsible. Guess you could say I'm trying to fill the void in my heart by putting as many bad guys behind bars as possible.”

Penelope sounds casual, but Will can empathise with her pain even without meaning to. He imagines something similarly tragic happening to Hannibal. Losing him would be unbearable. Will could not go on; every breath would be miserable and every day of the rest of his life would be pure suffering. If Will somehow survived the pain of losing his lover, he would end up distrustful and callous like Penelope too.

“I get you. The world’s been unfair to us both, so we make it our personal mission to bring justice into it”, Will speaks, shaking the agony-inducing thoughts out of his mind.

Penelope nods in agreement and for a moment they both stay silent, watching the waves blend with the horizon. Will wonders that maybe they are not so different from each other after all - constantly haunted by their traumatic past and hyperactive empathy. If he can build and maintain a genuine friendship with Jack, perhaps he can create one with Penelope too. It is nice to have people around that share similar experiences. Even if Will has to keep certain secrets from them.

“Have you ever had to kill?” she asks quietly.

“Two. Both in self-defence.” The blatant lie rolls off Will’s tongue easily and naturally. He always has answers ready for questions like this, of course.

“Two is more than enough to haunt you for the rest of your life.”

“Yeah. I see them in my nightmares. Used to see them when I was awake too”, Will recalls, remembering the encephalitis-fueled hallucinations of Hobbs that used to follow him everywhere.

“I have nightmares too. About all three of them”, Penelope admits softly, “You think it’d get easier the more you do it. Even though you're on duty and it’s justified and you have no choice but to pull the trigger. Every time it feels uglier and uglier.”

“You’re right. I don’t know how these guys do it over and over again.” Another smooth lie as he motions towards the human-boat.

“I won’t rest until we’ve caught them all.”

“Me neither.”

They stay silent for a while again, watching the investigators struggle to fit the ship-shaped corpse into a car in order to be transported to the lab.

“Do you revisit the old cases much?” Penelope asks, changing the topic.

Will raises an eyebrow, inviting her to elaborate.

“You know, since I’m new to Quantico, I was looking through the FBI archives of cases to read up on the active killers in this area. Couldn’t help but notice that the archive logs say you access them too. Thought you have a photographic memory”, Penelope says with a teasing smile.

“I do. I teach at the Academy, so I need the archives to get the post-mortem reports and things like that, to use in my lectures”, he explains casually.

Will searches through the archives for more than just lecture content, but he has natural explanations for every question about his real motives. Always.

“That’s nice. Balancing out the fieldwork with the classrooms.”

“Why were you looking at who else accesses the archive?” Will asks warily, “Only the head of the BSU can see those logs.”

He knows this from the research that he did to cover his tracks. Jack is the only one who can view the logs. He would not think there is anything odd about Will looking at the archives, being a lecturer. Though, it is unsettling that he has shared this knowledge with Penelope. If before this, Will was only moderately considering the possibility that Penelope is conspiring with Jack, now, his speculations are growing into overwhelming certainty.

“You’re right, only Jack can see them. Which makes me wonder how and why you know this”, Penelope counters in response.

She is giving Will her signature sharp stare again, brown eyes drilling into his skull.

“What are you implying?” he snaps.

“Nothing, Will.”

Since when have they been on first name basis? Will usually does not mind, but the way Penelope says his name sounds deeply patronizing.

“Right. Next you’re going to accuse me of killing this boat guy, because Zeller and Price constantly joke about me being a serial killer?”

“No, that’s not what —”

Ever since his encephalitis, Will has been able to recognise gaslighting when he sees it. And he sure as hell is not going to take any more of it. He feels like a saucepan that has been left on the stove, simmering under that gaslight for too long, irritation boiling inside him and finally overflowing.

“You got me. I’m the Virginia Vigilante after all.” As Will throws his hands above his head in mock surrender, he realises that he is shouting, voice dripping with frustrated cynicism.

“I’ll be on my merry way back to the fucking psych asylum where I belong. I bet Dr. Chilton has kept my cell vacant for me.”

Will storms off. Again.

He mumbles to Jack that he feels unwell and is taking the rest of the day off, briskly making his way to his car. He only stops to think once he is holed up inside, hands hesitating on the wheel.

Will needs to go back, observe, foresee, *control*. Give a misleading insight, a false tip, a distraction preventing Penelope from getting too close to the truth. Conceal an incriminating piece of evidence before anyone sees it, even though Will is certain there are none. Exert whatever sabotaging influence he may need to. Leaving Penelope there to analyse his crime scene without his watchful eye scares him. He has to calm down and go back there.

Instead, his words to Penelope keep replaying in his head. *I’m the Virginia Vigilante.*

And that is when he realises he made a mistake. Nobody has identified the victim’s body yet, or discovered that he was murdered specifically for his wrongdoings. Nobody is supposed to know yet that it was the Vigilante. Except that they do now, thanks to Will’s reckless outburst.

He can feel the panic gradually form in the distance, menacingly enveloping the car he is hiding in, slowly seeping in through the cracks. The realisation that he slipped up, and now the FBI are onto him, is chilling. It takes control of his legs first. His left thigh starts bouncing with fevered terror, then the right leg, knees bumping against the interior of the car. Then the fear gets to Will’s hands. A sinister tremble sets in, no matter how much he tries to fight it off by gripping the steering wheel.

And then, it takes over his breathing. Rapid exhales fogging up the windscreen, and equally rapid inhales clogging his throat. That suffocating feeling of helplessness before the

imminent danger. It sneers at him, whispers in his ear that they are coming. He wants to run, but his body feels paralysed, trapped in his godforsaken car.

He wants to call Hannibal. As much as he hates grounding exercises, somehow Hannibal guiding him through one with his tranquil voice always has the desired relaxing effect. But Hannibal is seeing patients today and would not be able to answer his phone. Despite his fear-stricken mind, Will somehow manages to summon his imagination to play Hannibal's voice inside his head.

Focus, Will. Mind over matter, Hannibal would say. *Inhale for four seconds.*

Will closes his eyes and focuses on the imaginary voice of his lover, ignoring the dread hanging in the air. He forces himself to breathe in slowly, grips his thighs with his fingers to stop his hands and legs from shaking. He squeezes hard. Harder. He notices with disdain that his short nails are not sharp enough to be felt through the fabric of his jeans.

Hold your breath for seven seconds.

He needs to go back to the crime scene. He needs to control his fear and push it out of his mind, his body, and his car. He pulls his sleeve up and digs the fingernails into his arm instead. Focusing on physical pain usually helps distract his mind from spiralling out of control.

That wasn't seven seconds, Will. Try again.

He knows that his pain threshold can serve as an off-switch for his thinking. He discovered this at the psychiatric ward, when the walls of his cell started to close in on him, and the only way to slow it was to hammer his head repeatedly against the brick panels until he drew blood. The action proved to be more damaging than relieving in the long run, but the principle behind it was effective.

Exhale for eight seconds.

He drags his nails across slowly, leaving pink trails on the underside of his arm. Capillaries fill with blood. Pain receptors fire underneath the skin. His brain focuses on the electrical impulses from his nerves. And finally lets go of the racing thoughts.

Repeat as many times as necessary.

He needs to go back to the crime scene. Now.

***

When Will walks back to the beach, no more than fifteen minutes after his outburst, no one attempts to point their gun at him and arrest him. It seems that nobody was alarmed by the fact that Will seemed to know before anyone else that Virginia Vigilante was behind this

murder. They must have thought it was another one of his sarcastic and cynical jokes. It was, but there was truth to it. Will sighs in relief.

“Back already?” Penelope dares to ask.

Will wants to rip her jaw off to stop her from talking.

“The Baltimore State Hospital is full, I’ll try again next week”, he retorts sardonically, rolling his eyes.

She does not respond and studies him with her observant auburn eyes instead. It feels like she is trying to decide if his emotional outburst was genuine or a front for something else.

“So, Virginia Vigilante? How do you know? We haven't ID’d the body yet.”

She picked up on his slip-up. Of course she did.

“How do you *not* see it’s the Vigilante? All the evidence is right here”, Will taunts back, unable to stop himself, “I’m really starting to doubt your profiling skills. Instead of profiling the killers, all you do is profile *me* . Do you really think I did this?”

Rude. If Hannibal were here to witness this, Will would end up on the rolodex. He really needs to work on his self-restraint, especially around Penelope.

“I don’t think you’re a killer, Will”, is all she says.

The way she uses his name still sounds patronising, but Will decides to let it slide. No need to cause any more drama.

“I’m sorry, okay?” he says instead, swallowing his pride, “I’m… sensitive to people implying I did something that I didn't. Always feels like a personal attack.”

“I get it. Knowing your history, it makes sense that this stuff sets you off.”

“I'll buy you a coffee as an apology”, Will starts to suggest, but quickly trails off as his eyes land on the paper cup in Penelope’s hands. A leftover from Price’s coffee run.

“I’ll hold you to this offer next time I see you”, she replies with a chuckle.

“Deal”, Will agrees and gives her a small smile. The most difficult smile he has ever had to conjure up.

***

When he finally gets home, Hannibal immediately asks about the scratch marks on his arm. To anyone else, Will would make the excuse that his dogs got overexcited. But he knows that

would not work with Hannibal.

“Grounding technique”, Will answers, only half aware that he is picking up a glass and pouring a generous serving of whiskey.

“What happened?” He hears Hannibal’s voice before feeling his fingers gently guide Will’s jaw until their eyes meet.

“Penelope fucking Rivas happened.”

“Is she getting too close to discovering the truth about the Virginia Vigilante?”

He feels Hannibal’s muscles tense for a brief moment. They had both thought it would be safe enough for Will to kill the sex-trafficking asshole, but it had turned out to be riskier than Will had anticipated. Mostly because of his own poorly managed temper.

“I don’t think so, no. She’s just poking and prodding at my head. I think she wants to believe I did it but has nothing tangible to base her hunch on.”

Hannibal lets out an ambiguous hum, indicating that he is deep in his thoughts, evaluating the potential threat. His hand moves from Will’s jaw into his hair, petting it idly, the gesture grounding them both.

“It’s nothing, she’s just messing with my head again”, Will reassures him, snaking his arms around his lover’s back and pulling their bodies towards each other.

“I know how much you loathe people getting in your head.”

“There’s nothing I hate more.”

Hannibal presses a soft kiss on his forehead, as if casting a protective spell around his skull that would hold back all intruders.

“Is she a variable that needs to be removed from the equation?” Hannibal asks.

It is posed as a casual and innocuous question, but has the potential to immediately turn into a ruthless extermination plan if that is where Will decides to take it.

“No”, Will responds, still adamant that there is no need to kill her, “Besides, if we did, Jack would definitely know something’s up.”

No matter how you frame it, if out of the two extraordinarily talented profilers at Quantico, Penelope was killed and Will left untouched, Jack would start suspecting them. Will does not want her dead anyway, not by his own hand at least. Killing people for simply being irritating is not his style, although he undoubtedly enjoys watching Hannibal do it. After a few spontaneous impromptu murders - starting with Garrett Jacob Hobbs and ending with Delilah Miller - he has settled on a more refined personal style; meticulously planned executions of carefully chosen people that in his opinion deserve it the most.

While having it other ways is satisfying, be it in self-defense or to protect someone else, Will does not want to kill that way. Some part of him is scared to lose control, abandon his person suit forever, become the kind of monster he talks about in his lectures. Self-restraint and morality are important if he wants to savour the experience of taking a life - *and he does* - never letting himself become desensitised to it and let it evolve into an uncontrollable addicting urge.

“You make a compelling point, dear”, he feels Hannibal purr, teeth tugging on his earlobe, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

“And where do you keep your lovers?” Will replies in a sultry tone, immediately noticing the changed atmosphere in the room.

Hannibal’s eyes fill with greedy desire as he nudges Will’s legs apart and gracefully slides to his knees between them. “How about here?”

“Perfect.”

Will’s eyelids fall shut and he lets out a shaky exhale as he feels Hannibal’s fingers brush below his navel, expertly undoing his belt buckle.

South-Southwest

Chapter Summary

> “Are you trying to influence me to commit premeditated murder?”
>
> “I’m asking if you’d want to. Hypothetically.”

Chapter Notes

> In the flashback part of this chapter, Will does a lot of thinking. And in the present-time part, he hardly does any thinking... if you catch my drift ;)

The next time Will finds himself spending the night at Hannibal’s place, it is in completely different circumstances from the last. This time, they share a bed. It feels like a natural progression in their incredibly complicated relationship; after somehow ending up kissing the man Will has been love-hating for an eternity, sleeping together seemed like a completely normal thing to follow.

Well, as normal as getting in bed with the Chesapeake Ripper, the most wanted man in the state, can be.

Will’s life has never been normal anyway. He really, truly, wholeheartedly did intend to capture the Ripper and watch him burn. He never meant to seduce the man. Or be seduced in return by the blood-stained lifestyle Hannibal leads. Yet here he is, on his back, catching his breath after having sex with the very same serial killer he has been trying to catch. And the fact that it was the most spectacular sex he has ever had, only complicates things further.

Will does not have any regrets. But he does have questions.

What does this make them? A one night stand, with nothing in common except a shared passion for killing? Or two men on a fast track to becoming a serial-killing couple?

Too many questions that Will feels he is not quite ready to seek answers to. As bizarre as it sounds, murder talk is exceedingly easier than pillow talk.

“So, should I expect an invitation to another evening rendezvous soon? I promise to just observe and not participate this time”, Will asks with a grin.

“I was hoping you would arrange one for us, this time.”

Will turns to look at Hannibal with an incredulous expression on his face. The man is acting like it was not Will that murdered the last two people: the man in Hannibal's living room and the woman in Will's shed. Will can excuse it because it was spontaneous. But there is absolutely no way he is going to deliberately arrange somebody's murder just so Hannibal can watch. He would much rather stick with conventional date ideas for now - if what they are doing can even be called dating. The cinema or dinner may be less exciting than bloodshed, but infinitely less risky.

"I have morals, Hannibal", Will huffs lightly with an eye roll, "And knowingly murdering innocent people isn't something my moral code agrees with."

"Who says they have to be innocent?"

Hannibal does have a point.

Will has never believed in God, and therefore not in heaven and hell, or in any form of reward or punishment that comes after death. There is no deity to please or pray to; only humans and their own arbitrary understandings of morality; the right and the wrong, the good and the bad. Will could write his own Ten Commandments, his own Seven Deadly Sins, and they would be just as valid rules to live by as the ones written by somebody else.

"If you killed a bad guy, would that make you a good guy? Or just as bad?" Will asks pensively.

The question is directed more at himself than Hannibal, because Hannibal's moral compass is far too distorted, even for someone like Will, who has knowingly strayed off the righteous path.

"It's your moral compass that's shifting, not mine. So, you tell me."

Will thinks about it. He is sure that the devil walks among the men on earth. In fact, he believes that there is a devil in everyone. Which means that by definition, nobody is fully good or bad. Though, in some people, the bad outweighs the good, and even though Will is no saint himself, ridding the world of those bad people would count as an act of virtue. Relatively speaking.

And Will knows where to find those bad people. After all, he has dedicated his life to catching them. Whether it is on the right or the wrong side of the law is a minor technicality. If Will single-handedly took down a sleazebag that has managed to escape their rightful punishment for years, he is sure his FBI colleagues would be pleased. And he knows that it feels good to kill; to consume life and create death. And if that death is deserved, it is truly a win-win situation.

"Are you trying to influence me to commit premeditated murder?"

"I'm asking if you'd want to. Hypothetically."

Hypothetically, Will could write his own moral code. Just like he could write his own commandments and deadly sins. He could vow to only slay the people that are stained darker

than himself, making the world purer in the process.

He could play God, be the man who takes justice into his own hands. Did God create man in his own image? Or did man create God in his own image? Will is not sure which way around it is, and to be honest, he does not care. Perhaps, God is not a supernatural being but simply the highest form of human existence, the end destination of one's becoming .

"Hypothetically, I'd want to take a trip down to New Orleans", Will muses, "And hypothetically, I'd invite you to join me."

He knows a man in New Orleans that would fit the bill. Someone Will worked with during his days in the police force. A truly disgusting excuse of a human being who abuses his power to further his racist and misogynistic agenda, his targeted hate crimes swept under the rug because he is one of the highest ranking officers at the precinct.

Louisiana feels familiar, and it is conveniently far from Virginia. If Will were to murder a man and leave behind his mutilated corpse, he would not do it on the East Coast, right under Jack's nose. New Orleans was where he evolved from a boy to a man. There is something poetic about going back there to evolve even further.

"Give me the hypothetical date and I will clear my schedule", Hannibal responds, giving him a small but pleased smile.

Will smiles at him in return. And just like that, hypotheticals turn into concrete ideas, and concrete ideas turn into a specific name and plan. He knows that he would go straight to hell for planning something like this.

But Will Graham does not believe in hell. He believes that he has one life on Earth, and nothing after that. And he is going to make this one life count.

***

Hannibal is a fan of classical conditioning. It is plain and effective. If you give the subject a neutral stimulus and repeatedly pair it with something they enjoy, they will end up associating that stimulus with pleasure. Of course, Will is the subject of the experiment, and conditioning him to enjoy killing is Hannibal's goal.

On a hunting day, Hannibal makes sure everything is perfect; he wears his finest aftershave, prepares an exceedingly decadent meal, and gives Will the most spectacular sex he has ever experienced. All this to induce a subconscious craving for killing and the pleasures associated with it. Hannibal has been running this experiment since they started seeing each other, so by this point Will is more than likely aware of what is happening, but he does not seem to mind.

They are driving Hannibal's Ford Falcon on a narrow road through the woods after a particularly ferocious evening, having left behind a body or two, just how they like it. Will

had requested that they dress to impress instead of wearing the usual plastic suits. Their pristine button-up shirts and fitted slacks got drenched in crimson, and Hannibal thinks it is aesthetically pleasing and a nice change to his usual meticulous cleanliness. They had been looking forward to this outing for a while, and they had fun. Hannibal could call it a date.

The forest is dark and deserted, so there is no danger of being seen in their gloriously disheveled state; drying blood sticking to hair and skin, satiated eyes and wide grins. And if someone did see them, well, then they would have to make more bodies. *Que sera, sera,* Hannibal thinks.

Their routine is to leave the Falcon in its hiding spot, a small shed deep in the woods, and switch to Hannibal's Bentley which they then drive home. Except as soon Hannibal brings the Falcon to a stop, he finds himself pressed against the car window with Will leaning over him, an assertive hand planted on Hannibal's thigh, catching his lips into a hungry kiss. His other hand pulls a lever, rolling the seat back to give them more room, and the next second Will has swiftly climbed on top of Hannibal.

All the relentless conditioning has worked wonders, perhaps too well even.

"Patience is a virtue, darling", Hannibal points out with a smile, putting just enough distance between their mouths to get the words out.

"I just pulled a woman's kidneys out of her body", Will drawls, lips moving to kiss Hannibal's jaw, "with my bare hands", and then slowly moving down to his neck, "I'm far from virtuous."

"And that makes you even more desirable", Hannibal admits, breath hitching as he feels Will's teeth scrape his throat lightly, "But we really must get out of here."

Will hums dismissively and focuses on sucking off the foreign blood that is staining Hannibal's neck, the only thing that is left of their victims. He keeps teasing the skin, licking and tugging it with his teeth, even though he is sure all of the blood has disappeared by this point. Will reaches down to pull another lever, making the back of the seat recline down sharply, eliciting a surprised exhale from Hannibal. The man finds himself practically in a horizontal position underneath his lover, looking up at the pleased smirk on Will's face.

"*Now*", Will growls, fingers already unbuttoning Hannibal's scarlet-stained shirt.

Hannibal rolls his eyes with light-hearted annoyance, but a certain area of his body seems rather excited by Will's ministrations. Will looks sublime, like an untamed god in his most vicious form. And Hannibal loves to worship him, but he would much rather do it in their bedroom than in the confines of the small car.

"There is hardly enough room in here", he tries to reason, "I doubt it will be comfor–"

"Do I look like I give a fuck right now?" Will interrupts, emphasising his words with a firm squeeze of the bulge in Hannibal's groin. When did his hand even find its way there? Sweet, devious boy.

Hannibal tries his hardest not to react to the sexual provocation and gives Will an unimpressed look instead. He hates being interrupted in such a rude way, regardless of how godlike Will is. More than that, he hates making a mess during a kill, putting them at risk of being caught. And what Hannibal hates the most is how Will's advances are effectively clouding the rational part of his brain, tempting him to disregard the fact that they should get somewhere safe before letting things get heated.

He takes a few deep breaths, bringing his electrified body back under the control of his sensible brain.

"You've got to let me get up, dear. I've got an idea", Hannibal purrs, gently coaxing Will's body up and out through the car door.

As soon as both of them are out of the car, Hannibal manoeuvres Will against the side of the Falcon, until the backs of his thighs are pressed against the metal, and then pushes further, forcing him to fall backwards onto the hood of the car. Will wraps his arms around Hannibal's neck for leverage as his knees give out, so when his shoulder blades hit the metal, he pulls Hannibal's body down with him.

Hannibal winces at the impact of his elbows colliding with the hard surface of the car, but despite that, the way their bodies are positioned in the moment still works to his advantage. Will is on his back on the bonnet, legs hanging over the edge but not far enough to get any anchorage from the floor. Hannibal is hovering on top of him, bracing himself on his forearms placed on either side of Will's head, chests almost touching. One of his feet is firmly on the ground, while the other knee slides up between Will's spread legs to rest against his crotch, effectively pinning him in place.

"Demanding, rude, and irresponsible", Hannibal reprimands in a low and predatory tone, teeth gnawing at Will's earlobe, "All of these warrant a punishment in my books."

The threat only excites Will further, causing his mouth to curl into a wide smirk. "What are you going to do? Bite me, eat me, *devour* me?"

All of the options sound appealing, but this is not about giving Will what he wants.

"No", Hannibal replies simply.

He halts his movements, looming over Will in menacing stillness and silence; the fleeting moment of peace before the monster attacks. Hannibal looks at the man underneath him with ice-cold, calculating eyes, replicating the same sadistic and merciless stare that he gave their victim before slashing her throat. A deliberate act to build up fear and anticipation before his next move, which inadvertently builds up something else in Will's pants too.

"Not until we get home", Hannibal groans in an attempt to will their growing erections to succumb, but knowing it is futile.

Will stares back at him, dark aquamarine irises almost non-existent around the dilated pupils, the smug expression still on his face. He slides off Hannibal's shirt, entwines his arms around his bare muscular back and holds him close, embracing the beast fearlessly and with passion.

The proximity of their bodies and the resulting sensations are intoxicating. Hannibal can see the unquenchable desire for ferocity in Will's eyes, smell the drying blood of their kill on him, feel the adrenaline-fuelled pulse under the skin, threatening to burst through the capillaries and drench them in fresh crimson.

Contrary to his initial decision to deny Will his pleasures, he wants to give in. As much as Hannibal enjoys exercising self-control and making Will wait, stretching his lover's limits and patience, he also enjoys letting hell break loose.

"I don't think you're going to be able to wait that long", Will whispers, lips brushing Hannibal's ear.

And he is right. So Hannibal snaps.

He yanks Will's head backwards by tugging sharply on a strand of curls, and sinks his teeth into Will's exposed neck. Will asked if Hannibal was going to bite. So Hannibal does exactly that. Incisors digging into the soft flesh, pulling and marking the skin. Will inhales sharply, a small yelp escaping his lips, fingers grabbing handfuls of Hannibal's hair and curling into fists. Hannibal un-clenches his jaw and bites again, this time into the junction of Will's neck and shoulder, feeling the tissue twitch in pain between his teeth.

"Fuck... Now", Will breathes out.

It sounds like a pleading whine, but feels like an unquestionable order. And Hannibal knows that every cell in his body is bound to comply with his beloved's request.

The sight of Will, covered in blood, drenched in death, hungry for violence, and radiating magnificent cruelty, is what makes him so irresistible to Hannibal. He clashes their mouths together, determinedly ridding Will of his shirt, pressing their hips against each other, fumbling with the belt buckle. Will wraps his legs around Hannibal's middle, pulling him closer against his hips, never breaking their fervent kiss. While their bodies are intertwined, Will covertly manoeuvres them on the side, and then quickly flips them around, ending up on top of Hannibal.

Hannibal's eyes fly open and he breaks the kiss, suddenly realising what has happened.

"You cunning little-"

The rest of the words get stuck in his throat when one of Will's hands finds its way into his pants and gives him a firm squeeze. How devious of Will, wiggling his way out of being cornered by distracting Hannibal with those indulgent kisses. And honestly, Hannibal cannot even be annoyed.

"Me, cunning? Never", Will drawls with a fake-innocent look on his face, complete with doe-eyes, sliding off the hood of the car and sinking to his knees between Hannibal's spread legs.

Hannibal knows Will could spend an eternity giving him head, and normally he would fully delight in the experience, but they have to go. And now Will is practically begging Hannibal to shove his head down on his cock and hold it there, with the way he is licking and teasing

Hannibal's already painfully profound erection. But they have to be done as fast as possible; this is not the time to be spoiled by the wonders of Will's sinful mouth. So Hannibal tangles his hands in Will's hair, yanking him up and shoving him face first into the bonnet of the car, this time pinning his wrists down with one hand, while the other wastes no time and spreads Will's ass cheeks apart.

"We cannot be heard or seen here", Hannibal growls, emphasising his words by pushing a finger inside, slightly rougher than usual, to punish Will for initiating all of this. As expected, Will just inhales and smirks.

"What, we can't take care of a couple of unlucky forest dwellers that may come across us?"

"And have to take care of the entire FBI department when they come for us tomorrow?" Hannibal retorts, adding another finger.

He immediately swipes them across Will's prostate, eliciting a blissful mixture of a moan and whine.

"I've got the entire FBI department wrapped around my finger."

The statement is cocky but true, and extremely satisfying for Hannibal to hear. And when said in Will's needy lust-filled voice, it sends intense sparks of pleasure right to Hannibal's groin.

"Yes you do. My sly, scheming boy."

He leans down to affectionately kiss the nape of Will's neck, while a third digit joins the other two in finger-fucking his beloved. Will gives him another impatient half-grunt, half-moan and pushes back with his hips eagerly. Somehow he has wiggled his hands free from Hannibal's grip and reaches around to grasp at Hannibal's back, drawing his nails across the skin.

"C'mon, please", Will demands, twisting his neck around as much as possible to look at Hannibal, to tell him how much he wants this with his eyes, if not already apparent through his voice.

And Hannibal is not the kind of man that needs to be asked twice. He gives his aching cock a few pumps, before lining it up with the crease of Will's ass cheeks and pushing inside. It feels divine, no less. He thought he would get used to this, but there are no limits to how breathtaking it can feel, how gratifying the connection between them can be, and how many levels of remarkable their love can reach.

The car's suspension creaks as they bounce on it, flesh pounding against flesh. Amidst the sharp fevered movements, there is tranquility; a heavenly bliss that Hannibal gets lost in. They have done this countless times before, but every time Hannibal is entranced by the ethereal beauty of his lover just the same.

He can see every muscle in Will's back, contouring out from underneath his skin, as they stretch and contract rhythmically to allow him to meet Hannibal's thrusts. He is enticed by

the perfection of Will's skin, soft and smooth, its texture resembling the cream on top of a cappuccino, seasoned with occasional dark speckles. He ends up subconsciously changing the back-and-forth movements of his hips from sharp and energetic into slower and languid, so he can focus on appreciating the intricacies of his beloved's body with more precision. The change of pace draws out a content sigh from Will, as his eyes fall shut and his hand extends to grip the edge of the car's hood for leverage.

Hannibal marvels at the shape of Will's extended arm, the way the curve of his bicep blends into his shoulder. There is an old bullet wound on Will's left shoulder and another cicatrix left by a knife on his right. Hannibal plants a kiss on both scars and swears that he is going to *rip apart* anyone that dares to leave another mark on Will.

"*Fuck*, Hannibal", Will breathes out in response, delighted at Hannibal's gesture of simultaneous possessiveness and gentleness.

His other hand that has been resting on Hannibal's thigh turns into a firm grip, fingernails digging into the skin and leaving behind pink trails as they drag down. Hannibal grunts at the sensation, recognising it as a demand for more. His dear Will, always insatiable. He quickens the pace again, resuming the previous relentless tempo of his hips.

Will gives him a satisfied groan. Hannibal smirks and continues to pound into him, nothing but the sounds of skin hitting skin and the mutually-complementing sequences of their heavy breathing filling the space. It feels incredible, the mixture of the physical sensations and his profound love for Will so overwhelming that Hannibal almost has to close his eyes. He would, but he wants to keep looking, wants to devour every inch of Will's godlike body with his eyes.

"Come closer", Will gasps, moving his hand to reach around Hannibal's back, pulling his upper body down.

Hannibal obeys, pressing his chest against Will's back and burying his face into the luscious mess of walnut-brown curls. His hair smells tangy like sweat and coppery like blood, left over from the crime scene they created mere hours ago. That scent, that maddening fragrance of a ferocious predator, is what drives Hannibal closer to the edge. He pulls their bodies off the metal just enough to slide his arm underneath and wrap his hand around Will's cock, pumping him in time with the rocking of his own hips.

"My beautiful feral thing", Hannibal utters on the downstroke, voice thick with adoration and lust.

Will looks at him out of the corner of his eye, the gaze veiled by his eyelashes, but burning with the intensity of a thousand suns nonetheless. The spark starts in Will's eyes, blazing through his entire body, making his bones shake under the enormous wave of heat that finally erupts and spills onto Hannibal's hand. He keeps stroking Will through it, whispering words of pure adoration and undying devotion into his ear.

The sight of Will, in all his bloodthirsty glory, laid out after the culmination of his ravenous desire, *desire for Hannibal*, is all Hannibal ever wanted. And knowing that Will wants him

back just as much, baring himself for Hannibal to conquer and unravel, is what lights that same all-consuming heat in his own body.

He grips Will's hips tighter for leverage and braces his forehead against the side of Will's neck, right on the still-throbbing bite mark, and lets himself succumb to the overwhelming fireworks of pleasure. The climax shatters him from the inside, but simultaneously rebuilds the pieces into something better than he was before. Something better, stronger and complete.

He knows Will can feel it too, as their gradually-slowing exhales intermingle in the air. These constant acts of dismantling and rebuilding each other are part of the thread that is stitching their bodies, minds and souls closer together every day.

"For once, I am *not* sorry about the mess", Will huffs out eventually with a fond grin. Hannibal feels himself chuckle at the comment.

He gets on his feet and groans, dreading the clean-up that is ahead of them - they always leave the car spotless, not a single fingerprint or trace of DNA to be found. Right now, both the interior and the exterior of the Falcon are covered in various fluids. Hannibal is on the fence about whether their episode of unhinged passion was worth the long and meticulous cleaning process. But after seeing Will's sated and affectionate smile, he decides that it definitely, unequivocally was.

South-West

Chapter Summary

> Will decides that the only way to ascertain that Penelope's story is a trap is to walk right into it. Once he is sure, he will go straight to Jack and tell him about her dirty scheme, rightfully ruining her reputation for trying to outsmart Will.

Chapter Notes

> Okay this is straight up the most intense and suspenseful chapter I've ever written. Let me know how I did in the comments!

It turns out that Penelope was fully serious when she said she would hold Will to his promise of buying her a coffee. She asks him to meet at a cafe down the block from the FBI academy to “brainstorm together about the killers”. Will agrees, unsuspecting of how the rest of the evening is going to turn out.

At the cafe, Penelope tells him about a cabin in the woods that she has come across. She suspects that she could sense the Ripper’s presence there, but before telling the BSU team about it, she wants Will’s second opinion on whether her intuition is correct. So, like any friendly colleague, Will agrees to go see the cabin with her.

They drive in silence. The sun is about to set, its last rays peeking from between the emerald-green trees of the forest.

“Turn left here”, Penelope instructs.

Will obeys, turning his car onto a small unpaved road, barely wide enough for a car to pass. After a few more minutes of driving, a small wooden cabin comes into view.

“This is it”, she says.

They leave the car to inspect the cabin. There is a large rusty lock on the door, but it is easy to crack open. The first thing they notice inside is the hunting equipment; gutting knives, spare rifle ammunition, a pair of boots and spare camouflage clothing. Although most of the surfaces look dusty, a trained eye can notice that the working bench has been used lately. Will’s first impression is that the cabin is simply a space where a lone deer hunter stores his supplies. Penelope moves to stand in the middle of the small room, eyes closed, her face tense with concentration.

“This is where he guts them”, she says eventually, with a chilling note in her voice, “The lover couple from the pool, this place is screaming their names. Do you feel it?”

Will pauses. He closes his eyes too, just like every time he reconstructs a crime scene. He does not need to use his profiler skills to know the cabin has absolutely nothing to do with Hannibal. But he pretends to analyse the surroundings regardless, while using the time to think about what all of this means.

There is a chance that Penelope is completely wrong about this. If Will affirms her faulty theory, it will lead the investigation down a false trail. She would not know any better, and this would be the ideal scenario. Will would love to watch her make a fool of herself in front of the entire BSU.

But he knows Penelope is smart. It is possible that she fabricated the whole story about this cabin belonging to the Ripper, and is testing Will to see if he would tell her the truth about what he can sense. In that case, the safe response would be to tell her that the Ripper was never here, proving that Will is loyal to the FBI and no one else.

The more Will thinks about it, the more he is convinced that this is a trap. It seems unlikely that Penelope would miraculously encounter an odd cabin in the forest and be adamant that it is related to the Ripper. Unless she was lying to him on purpose.

If he dodged the trap, he would never know for sure what Penelope’s intentions are. And Will wants to expose her for this, for trying to play mind games with him. The suspicion that he is being played is making Will’s blood boil. It is that same anger he felt when he was locked in that cell at the Baltimore State Hospital, certain that Hannibal had manipulated his brain and almost - *almost* - convinced him that he is a killer. There is no way in hell he is going to let anyone play him like that ever again.

Will decides that the only way to ascertain this is a trap is to walk right into it. Once he is sure, he will go straight to Jack and tell him about Penelope’s dirty scheme, rightfully ruining her reputation for trying to outsmart Will.

“Yeah, I sense the Ripper”, he affirms, slowly opening his eyes.

Penelope is now standing outside on the veranda of the cabin, with her back turned to him, appearing to be idly looking out to the forest. What betrays her disguise of tranquility is the visible tensing of her arms. As Will scans her body from head to toe, he notices her gun missing from the holster at her hip.

It is a trap. Of course it is.

“If you’re going to gun me down, at least turn around and look me in the eye”, Will baits, masking his uneasiness with bold defiance.

He even takes a few steps towards her, walking out onto the veranda. Just to show how unthreatened he feels. Because if he were innocent, he would have no reason to feel threatened.

Penelope turns around slowly, and as Will predicted, there is a gun pointing at him. She is holding it with one hand, stomach-level. No proper stance. A loose threat, but a threat regardless.

“You lied to me. Why?” she asks, watching him inquisitively.

There is not a hint of surprise in her voice. Of course she set this all up, knowing he would lie to her.

“To see if you were testing me”, Will responds.

He keeps his voice calm, acutely aware of the barrel of Penelope’s Glock 17 staring at him. He moves to lean on the railing of the veranda, resting his hands on the wooden beam. A somewhat casual pose, but one that deliberately keeps his hands visible and away from his own gun, just as a precaution.

Penelope narrows her eyes.

“You lied to me, intending to send me onto a false trail. What does that make you?”

It gradually dawns on Will why she brought him here. Penelope must suspect that he is the Ripper’s accomplice and this is a scheme to force him to admit it. But Will is just as smart as her, and will not give her the satisfaction of manipulating him.

“That makes me a liar, nothing more”, Will points out in an incredulous tone, “I lied to see if you were playing me.”

He has not done anything implicating. Nothing she could use against him. Her gun may be adding a little unwanted pressure, but Will is not going to let it intimidate him.

“That makes you an *accomplice*. Think about it for a second, Graham. You’ve brought me to an isolated location, a place I didn’t know existed, and you brought a gun.”

Will grits his teeth. The way she describes the current situation really does paint him as a criminal. Maybe he should have just played it safe and told her the truth, instead of trying to outsmart her.

“You have three options”, Penelope speaks again. “You can choose to stay silent, and tomorrow I’m going to tell Jack that you tried to mislead me about the Ripper. You can try to attack me, but if you do, I’ll shoot you right here and now, and the FBI will find a lovely scene in which you tried to kill me, making you the Ripper’s accomplice. Or, you can tell me what you know about the Ripper, and we both walk out of here unharmed.”

“Or, I tell everyone that you held me at gunpoint and tried to frame me”, Will counters.

It does not sound as convincing as he was hoping; nowhere near representative of the anger igniting inside him. Will Graham has had enough of being a pawn in other people’s games. He has had enough of being used and manipulated by either serial killers or the FBI to further their respective agendas. He has had enough of being painted guilty, framed for murder, convicted for the crimes he did not commit. Because as much as he tries to act strong and

unbothered, being the victim of this constant power play makes him feel small, powerless and terrified.

“What reason would I have?” Penelope asks.

Her words ring in Will’s ears as his mind flashes back to Garrett Jacob Hobbs’s house, to the situation where he heard those exact words before. He remembers Hannibal asking him the same question, *What reason would I have?* He recalls Hannibal’s sinister and calculating eyes, the icy gaze slowly moving between Will’s face and the gun he was pointing at Hannibal.

Except this time, in this disturbing flashback Will’s mind is subjecting him to, the weapon is in Hannibal’s hands. A far more accurate portrayal of the dynamic between them that night. Despite holding Hannibal at gunpoint, Will was not in control. He was all but in control, losing his sense of reality, losing everything. Spiralling into madness after being wound up so tight for so long.

Wind you up and watch you go, Penelope’s voice echoes through his head, mirroring his own words to Hannibal that night in Hobbs’s kitchen.

Penelope has wound him up, and now Will is spiralling into madness. Once again. Everything is spinning, the reality is mixing with his nightmares, his vision is blurring, and he cannot tell where he is anymore. The set up, the threat to frame him if he does not play along. The hurt, the betrayal, the phantom pain in his left arm where Jack shot him.

All too real.

He has been wound up so tight that it is hard to breathe, and he is frantically gasping for air, over and over and over, until it feels like his lungs are going to burst.

Inhale for four seconds, he imagines Hannibal’s voice in his mind, reciting the familiar grounding exercise.

Except that it is anything but grounding this time - playing Hannibal’s voice in his head only sends him deeper into the void of his unresolved trauma, caused by the man himself. It hurts. It hurts despite the fact that Will loves him now, despite the apologies and the forgiveness and the promises to never hurt each other like that again.

Hannibal is not here, and Will is alone. Always has been and always will be.

And they are onto him.

He can feel them. The agents hiding in the woods, their guns pointed at him. He can see them. The sniper rifles staring at him, like monsters with their eyes glowing in the dark. He can sense the tiny red dots crawling on his body like ants, marking him as the target. He blinks. The dots are gone but he can still feel them, burning through his clothes, piercing his skin.

Inhale for four-

“Just shoot me, Jack. Right here, like last time.” Will’s loud, exasperated voice sounds deafening in the silence of the woods.

His hand instinctively crawls up to his left arm, resting over the scar from the bullet wound that Jack gave him before he was arrested for the Copycat murders. He smooths the wrinkles on his jacket, preparing his arm to be shot once again, closing his eyes, bracing himself before the impact.

Inhale for four seconds, inhale for four seconds, inhaleforfourseconds -

There is no gunshot. Only Penelope softly clearing her throat.

“There’s no one here but you and me, Graham.”

Will opens his eyes. Waits for the world to refocus, until he can distinguish between the reality and the panic-induced flashbacks in his head. His hands are still on the rails. Visible. Knuckles turned white, clenching around the wooden beam. His mouth feels dry and his mind is drawing a blank. But he can breathe and he is not going to die. Not at this very second, at least.

Penelope looks at him with a puzzled expression on her face, unsure of how to interpret Will’s noticeably agitated state. She is still holding the gun; not giving up on trying to get answers out of him. So, Will says the first thing that comes to his mind, something that is not a lie, but not close to the full truth either.

“I’m not the Ripper. I’ve got nothing to confess.”

“But you lied about him. Tell me why”, Penelope presses.

“Because you forced me to!” Will exclaims, equal measures of anguish and anger in his voice. And now that he is talking, he is unable to stop. “No matter what I say, you’re going to go to Jack and accuse me of being someone I’m not - the Ripper, the Ripper’s accomplice, some other psycho killer, I don’t know. And he’s going to believe *you* , not me. Just like he didn't believe me when I said I wasn't the Copycat Killer.”

The words are coming out choked and broken, no sign left of Will’s previous act of fearlessness and defiance. It has never worked for him anyway.

“If you tell me, I won’t go to Jack”, Penelope says, voice soft but firm. “It’s going to stay between you and me.”

And as reassurance that she is going to keep her word, she lowers the gun.

The removal of the immediate physical threat suggests to Will that he is playing his cards right, but it does not ease his spinning mind. The rational part of his brain is telling him to focus, reminding him that Penelope still has him cornered and he has to find a way out. Meanwhile, the emotional part of his brain is a whirlwind of feelings, ranging from terror-stricken helplessness to cold-blooded rage, directed at everyone and everything. Penelope. Hannibal. Jack. Anyone who dares to mess with Will’s head again.

“Between you and me?” Will echoes skeptically. It is hard to believe, but it is what he has to work with. “I want to go after the Ripper myself. Alone.”

He speaks slowly, with each word regressing further into the man he was during the most dire moments of his life; bleeding on Hobbs’s floor, rotting away in the asylum, hearing about Abigail and Beverly’s awful fates. Will remembers how it felt to despise everybody for betraying him, but mainly just one man that was behind it all. He embraces all that hurt and channels it into what Penelope wants to hear, praying to every god and goddess out there that this will get him out of here alive.

“The Ripper has let me know him like no one else does. We’re connected. I know him, even though I don’t know who he is. But I’m going to find out. And I’m going to end him myself.”

Penelope tilts her head to the side. Will cannot quite tell if she is sold on his performance.

“You know something about the Ripper that the rest of us don’t, right?” she clarifies.

Will pauses. He does not have a plan or an answer, does not know where he is heading. But he has no choice but to keep going with his act, with whatever story he is conjuring up about his relationship with the Ripper.

“This connection that we have, he wants it to be between just me and him. It’s why he’s let me come this close.”

Every word is made up on the spot, stacking lies on top of lies, like a game of Jenga. One wrong move, one poorly balanced decision, and the whole tower is going to come crashing down. One wrong move, and Will is going to lose.

“I know how he thinks. Almost to the point of being able to tell when, where and how he’s going to strike next. But if I say anything to anyone, he’s going to kill me. And you will lose your best chance at catching him.”

Will is still clutching at the rails with his hands. Forcing them to stop shaking. Forcing himself to breathe evenly. As if a simple exhale that is too forceful is going to cause the barely-balanced tower of blocks to collapse.

Penelope looks at him intently, but her expression is like a blank wall, impossible to tell if she believes him or not. Will feels himself growing desperate.

“I don’t want to die, Penelope. Please don’t make me talk”, he asks, voice barely louder than a whisper.

“Fine.” Her expression softens visibly.

But Will knows better than to let his guard down. It could very well be another trap.

“I can’t tell you what I know, but that doesn’t mean you can’t *feel what I know*”, Will enunciates, slowly, every word carrying colossal meaning, as if he were giving her instructions on how to save someone’s life.

Because in a way, it is exactly what Will wants Penelope to think she is doing.

Penelope Rivas could save Will Graham from the Chesapeake Ripper. By using her empathy to feel her way through Will's mind. The same way Will used his empathy to feel his way through the Ripper's mind.

Penelope gives him a small smile as she realises what he is alluding to.

"I underestimated you, Will Graham", she says with a tiny nod.

Will reciprocates her smile, feeling relief wash over him.

The thought of actively inviting her to get inside his head still makes Will shudder, but he knows it is the only way out of this. He created a successful diversion, convincing her that he is the Ripper's pawn rather than a willing accomplice. Now he has to stick with his act right until the end. He has to let Penelope see him; enough parts of him to convince her that she is getting somewhere, but not enough to expose himself and Hannibal.

He can learn to live a life that keeps his tower of lies balanced. He has to.

***

When Will drives Penelope home that same night, she invites him in for a glass of wine, as a peace offering. He accepts it.

As Hannibal said, it is wise to keep friends close and enemies closer. Although Will is not sure which Penelope is, he knows killing her is not the answer. He never wanted to kill her, and it is a relief that he does not have to. She is a complicated problem, and complicated problems require complicated solutions.

For now, playing innocent and keeping a truce is enough. So Will lets himself stay a while, nursing his wine and talking to her. It is light, good-natured small talk that does a good job at reducing the tension between them and igniting the potential for building something. Not quite a friendship, but perhaps an alliance.

Maybe one day they can become friends. Maybe she can join him and Hannibal for dinner. As a guest, not as a dish. Maybe one day.

When Will finally gets on his feet to leave, he feels everything with more clarity, compared to when they met up before driving to the cabin. Both of them have stripped a layer of pretence off each other. Getting to see Penelope with clarity comes with a price, but he thinks he can afford to shed a few more layers.

"Good night, Penelope", he wishes, turning to look at her before getting in his car.

"Sleep tight", she echoes, "Don't let the monsters bite."

Will chuckles at her words, at the way she sees the Ripper as the monster under Will's bed.

The truth is, it is Will who is the monster. Hiding under the bed of everyone who is blind to his true nature, including Penelope. But Will is not going to bite. Because his self-restraint is stronger than his appetite, and she is smart enough not to dangle her foot over the edge of the bed.

West-Southwest

Chapter Summary

> “Oh, what’s this?” Penelope asks in a curious tone.
>
> Will’s whole body jerks involuntarily, sending a small cloud of powdered sugar into the air. Hannibal, on the other hand, conceals his surprise and displeasure at Penelope’s dangerous discovery remarkably well.

Chapter Notes

> This one's a bit short but I hope the nice mix of suspense and humour makes up for it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ever since the incident at the hunting cabin, and the subsequent truce and bonding at Penelope’s place, she and Will have started talking to each other. Actually *talking*, rather than poking around each other’s heads. That was when Will realised that he enjoys Penelope’s company. Although it seems contradictory, it feels tremendously easier to simply act normal in her presence than be defensive and build walls.

He supposes it is all about the mindset; if you treat someone like an enemy, they will eventually become one. Will does not want to view Penelope as an enemy, never wanted to.

She is a great conversationalist and pleasant to be around. She even shares that same morbid sense of humour that Will has adopted into his personality. They talk about the gruesomeness of work, the meaning of life, even their respective traumatic past. Sometimes in the break room, sometimes at Penelope’s house over glasses of wine.

At this rate, there are probably rumours travelling around Quantico that they are having an affair. But both of them know it is never going to happen. She is a widow who is determined to continue her husband’s legacy. And to think that Will would ever be unfaithful to Hannibal, trading their glorious blood-stained lifestyle for an office fling with a fellow profiler, would be ridiculous.

So, not really to curb the rumours but rather because Hannibal has been itching to meet Penelope, Will and Hannibal have her for dinner.

It is a wonderful evening; Hannibal has prepared a decadent multi-course meal and retrieved one of his finest wine bottles from his collection. There is classical music softly playing on

Hannibal's vintage record player, blending with Hannibal and Penelope's earnest conversation about South American traditions. To Will's great pleasure and relief, they get along exceedingly well. Hannibal is being his charming self, always able to find shared interests and experiences with anyone, due to being extremely knowledgeable in a wide array of topics. Will is surprised to learn that Hannibal has spent time travelling in Argentina, where Penelope grew up.

Later, they move the conversation to the kitchen, where Will assists Hannibal with preparing the dessert, a handmade roulade with red berries and vanilla-infused cream.

"I like your kitchen", Penelope says, looking around appreciatively, "It makes sense for someone who loves to cook to have such a well-equipped space."

"When I purchased this property, I renovated the entire kitchen to fit my needs", Hannibal explains with pride.

Will chuckles internally at how innocent Hannibal is making his culinary needs seem, while sifting powdered sugar onto the roulade. Although he tries to be careful, he somehow manages to get the white dust all over the pristine kitchen.

"Did you change the floors too?" Penelope asks and crouches down to examine the smooth wooden floorboards.

She is standing awfully close to the hidden trapdoor embedded in the floor, which is making the hairs at the back of Will's neck stand up uncomfortably. The door leads to the secret basement, where one would find all the tools ever used by the Chesapeake Ripper *and* the Virginia Vigilante to kill, mutilate and display their victims. It would be every FBI agent's dream discovery. Will scolds - no, *curses* - himself in his mind for thinking it would be a good idea to welcome such an FBI agent into their house and kitchen.

He tries to frantically think of a distraction; considers knocking a bowl onto the floor, anything to divert Penelope's attention from examining the floor. But her attentive eyes are too fast, immediately spotting the thin ridges in the wooden boards outlining the door.

"Oh, what's this?" she asks in a curious tone.

Will's whole body jerks involuntarily, sending a small cloud of powdered sugar into the air. Hannibal, on the other hand, conceals his surprise and displeasure at Penelope's dangerous discovery remarkably well.

"It's the basement", he responds in a perfectly casual voice, "I prefer to acquire my ingredients raw as much as possible, and process them myself. I thoroughly enjoy brewing my own beer, pickling my own vegetables and curing my own meats. Such hobbies require storage space that is protected from sunlight and heat."

If Will were not tense from head to toe, he would laugh at how inconspicuously truthful Hannibal is being, openly admitting that he procures his meat himself.

"Interesting," Penelope comments, sounding just as casual as Hannibal.

“Would you like to see?” Hannibal offers with a smile.

A smile so wide that it shows his teeth, while his eyes remain detached and calculating. Will knows that smile; harmless on the outside, savage and predatory on the inside.

That particular expression on Hannibal’s face makes Will feel on edge. It could either mean that Hannibal is simply masking his apprehension, or that he has some kind of devious plan in mind. And Will is not sure which it is. For once, he is grateful for being clumsy and getting powdered sugar on his face, because it hides how pale with nervousness he must be. However, Hannibal and Penelope seem to pay him no mind and descend into the basement, continuing their innocuous chatter.

Will wants to follow them down the stairs, but he is covered in the ivory dust and only half-finished decorating the roulade. There would be no reason for him to rush to join Hannibal and Penelope in the basement, unless he was anticipating something happening. And that, if anything, would make things suspicious. Will tries to calm himself down by remembering that whatever happens, Hannibal must have thought ahead and ensured that their safety will not be compromised - otherwise he would not have invited Penelope to see the hidden space under the kitchen so willingly.

They always keep the basement clean of any remnants of their victims, in case of an unexpected situation like this. There is nothing incriminating to be found, per se, but if Penelope looks around properly, peeking inside the cupboards and cabinets there, she would discover several guns, a multitude of knives and surgical tools, an array of questionable medical substances that is way too large for a psychiatrist to keep in his house, Hannibal’s plastic suits, and a menacing-looking meat slicer. After seeing such things in the basement, an intelligent profiler like her may put two and two together.

Will would rather not test his luck with that. Not again, after barely managing to weasel his way out of Penelope’s trap at the hunting cabin.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the trapdoor close shut, quietly, *as if of its own volition*, setting firmly in place. But Will knows better. Suddenly, his curious need to be down in that basement right now turns into an uncontrollable urge.

He freezes, turning to his senses and intuition to tell him what to do. There is no sound coming from the basement. Of course not - Hannibal ensured the space is soundproof for a reason. If something were to go wrong, Will would not be able to hear it.

He is very familiar with the kind of clever schemes Penelope can orchestrate, having been subjected to one himself just two weeks ago. He would not put it past her to deliberately trap Hannibal in the basement and attack him.

The thought of this possibility unnerves Will even further, and before he realised, his hand has subconsciously pulled open a cutlery drawer and curled around a steak knife. Rationally, he knows that Hannibal can handle an ambush like that, especially because he knows that basement like the back of his own hand and has probably killed a dozen people in there, if not more.

Yet, Will is filled with an overwhelming compulsion, a carnal need to protect his lover, the unhinged vicious force inside him that is ready to fight, overpower, and kill if necessary. Unable to keep it down any longer, he takes a few steps towards the basement door.

Then, something unexpected brushes against Will's legs, and he jumps up in surprise, knocking the metal sieve and the bag of sugar off the table. They fall on the floor with a loud clatter.

At his feet, Buster yelps, frightened by the sudden sound, and takes off running to the dining room.

As if in slow-motion, Will watches the dog's frantic movements leave a long trail of white dust on the floor. He slowly figures out that the powdered sugar must have coated poor Buster from head to tail as it fell.

He catches his breath, assessing the situation. He must have been so preoccupied with Hannibal and Penelope's motivations that he did not realise Buster had come up to his feet, and managed to almost trip over the dog. And now, his beloved pet is covered in sugary dust, running around the house and spreading it all over Hannibal's luxurious carpets and furniture.

It has been several long moments of Will being distracted by the chaos in the kitchen, and now, if his gut feeling was correct, either Hannibal is about to kill Penelope, or Penelope is about to kill Hannibal. And Will needs to be down there to stop it, but instead he's up here letting himself get side-tracked by the dog and the *fucking powdered sugar* -

The basement door swings open, and Hannibal and Penelope's voices fill the room, still immersed in their good-natured chat.

No surprise attacks. No fighting. No killing.

With every second that passes, Will feels more and more like an idiot. He is painfully aware of the mess he has caused in the kitchen and now the dining room, the racing of his heart, and the knife still in his hand. He thanks every god and goddess in existence that at least he did not unintentionally drop the blade on Buster. Will realises he was just being paranoid, and scrambles to slide the knife back into the drawer before it can be seen by the others.

Hannibal looks quizzically at the white mess everywhere, and Will feels even more like an idiot. He awkwardly explains that he accidentally almost tripped over the dog and feels his face burning red; a mixture of embarrassment, built-up tension and frustration at himself for over-reacting this way. Penelope and Hannibal do not seem bothered. They laugh it off and help him clean up.

The rest of the evening goes just as peacefully as it started. After finishing the dessert, Penelope makes her way to the door, endlessly praising Hannibal's cooking and expressing a desire to be back for another decadent dinner soon. Hannibal accepts the compliments with an unwavering smile, and Will pulls a similar one onto his face too. After she leaves, they keep up the facades of a perfectly normal and harmless couple for a few minutes, *just in case*.

“What the hell was that?” Will asks eventually, eager to drop his mask for the night. “Why’d you take her to the basement? You scared the shit out of me.”

“That was not my intention, dear”, Hannibal responds in an apologetic tone and starts clearing empty dishes from the table, “I could sense that she was suspicious about the basement, so I decided to show her that her apprehensions about us are unwarranted.”

Will gnaws on his lip, unsure how to respond. Not only that, but he is unsure how to feel about the situation altogether. Hannibal pauses in the middle of his table cleaning, expertly balancing at least five plates on one hand like a waiter at a five-star restaurant, and studies Will with inquisitive eyes.

“You thought that I took her down there to kill her, didn’t you?”

“Yeah”, Will admits.

Somehow, the way Hannibal looks at him makes him feel patronised and foolish, without meaning to. Will feels unnecessarily paranoid after perceiving danger and violence in a harmless dinner with a coworker. Is this who he has become? No longer a normal man but a killer that sees everything through blood-tinted glasses?

“It has to have crossed your mind at least”, Will continues defensively.

“Of course, it did. But you have told me numerous times that you don’t want to kill her, and I respect your wishes.”

A lump forms in Will’s throat as Hannibal’s words remind him of another coworker of his. Beverly. Well, ex-coworker, thanks to her snooping around Hannibal’s house and discovering something she should not have.

Will never asked about the details of how it happened, and Hannibal has been kind enough to never bring it up, knowing how much Will despises the fact that he had to murder her. After tonight’s events, Will cannot help imagining that this is exactly how Beverly died; caught after finding evidence in the basement and leaving Hannibal no choice but to ensure she would not come out of there alive. It still hurts Will that it had to happen; he had just begun to regard Beverly as a friend, and Hannibal took it away from him.

But that was then, and this is now. They have talked about it, forgiveness was sought and granted, and Hannibal promised to never kill anyone Will cares about again. And tonight, he kept his promise. Not that Will cares about Penelope, not on the same genuine friendship level like Beverly at least, though there is potential. It is the principle of Hannibal’s actions that matters to him.

“Thank you”, Will hums.

There is fondness twinkling in Hannibal’s eyes, and it looks like he knows exactly what Will is thanking him for. Will plants an affectionate kiss on the man’s cheek and picks up a stack of plates.

“Don’t worry about clearing the table. You’ve got the powdered sugar fiasco in the kitchen to clean up”, Hannibal reminds him with a note of lighthearted scolding in his tone.

Will gives him an apologetic grin and goes to retrieve the vacuum cleaner.

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone have any ideas or speculations about where Will and Penelope's budding friendship is going to lead? Let me know in the comments!

West

Chapter Summary

> The fire looks like streaks of orange on black background, like the swing of a pendulum Will imagines in his mind when deconstructing crime scenes. Except this time the deconstruction plays out forward instead of backwards. All puzzle pieces suddenly come together to form the most obvious picture.

Chapter Notes

> I wrote this chapter a while ago and tbh forgot how graphic it is. So this is your warning for detailed violence and murder, I'm sorry in advance for all the blood and gore hahaha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will drops his overnight bag on the floor of the substandard motel room with a groan and slumps into a barely-comfortable armchair in the corner. This is the best accommodation on the outskirts of New Orleans that he could find, and even then, it is barely a two-star abode.

His body is aching after being cramped in the car for the past sixteen hours. Will drove the first half of the way from Virginia to Louisiana, and slept the second half, stretched out on the uncomfortable passenger seat as much as possible, using his jacket as a blanket, while Hannibal took his shift at the wheel.

For a man who Will guesses would never settle for anything less than five-star luxury, Hannibal seems to be unbothered by the cheapness of the motel. He heads straight for the bed and immediately succumbs to the much-needed sleep, leaving Will alone with his thoughts; ruminating over his plan, wrestling with his moral compass. He is acutely aware that these are the last few hours of his life that he is going to spend as an at least somewhat morally upright man, hiding behind plausible deniability. The last few hours before committing something unforgivable.

So, Will decides to shower. The shower cubicle is like a confessional booth of his own making, where he is playing both the man who has come to confess his sins, and the god that will absolve him of those sins. Will wonders if the warm water can wash away his wrongdoings prior to him executing them. Or if he can scrub the conscience off his body, as if it is just dirt stuck to his skin, letting it disappear down the drain.

He emerges from the bathroom, fully clothed. Being nude around Hannibal makes him feel vulnerable, even though they have seen each other naked. Even though they have slept

together. Even though Will Graham had the Chesapeake Ripper on his back, legs spread, ankles on Will's shoulders, and loved every minute of it. He loved it because it made him feel powerful.

Powerful, like having other people at his mercy.

Powerful, like planning and executing a brutal murder of Sergeant Derryck Sullivan from the New Orleans Police Department.

Will knows it is going to make him feel magnificent. He knows that for a fact, but he is not entirely sure what is going to come after. When he goes through with the act, is he going to welcome the manic, empowering, bliss-inducing feeling with open arms? Or are his morals going to get the best of him? He is not sure. But there is only one way to find out.

So, Will sticks to the schedule and follows the plan. They do not have much time to waste if they want to be back in time for work on Monday morning, making it look like they never left the state. Will distracts himself from having to answer to his conscience by changing into clothes he would not mind ruining, readying their supplies, and examining the details of the plan with scrutinizing precision, probably for the hundredth time.

The distractions work, and his conscience stays silent while he finishes the preparation. He gulps down a mugful of subpar instant coffee and wakes Hannibal from his nap by offering him a caffeinated beverage too. His conscience stays silent while they find the repugnant sergeant Will despises, and watch his movements out of the tinted window of the car, waiting for the right moment.

Hannibal makes it look like a simple but fascinating party trick - maybe to him, it is. He approaches Sullivan with a charming smile, asks him for help with their car that has supposedly broken down. When the man is close enough, Hannibal knocks him out with a flawlessly-executed hit to the head with a crowbar, and swiftly lifts the limb body into the trunk with Will's help. Even then, Will's conscience stays silent.

Barely over half an hour later, when Will starts hearing muffled banging and shouting from the trunk, he fully expects his conscience to come knocking.

"You underestimated the amount of force needed behind that crowbar", he mutters under his breath, anxiously tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

Hannibal looks at him with amused eyes, brows raised slightly.

"I most definitely did not", he assures.

On a second thought, Will realises that Hannibal is right. There would be no satisfaction in subduing and killing an unconscious body. Initial minor incapacitation is the furthest Hannibal's involvement is going to go; he is going to leave all of the main execution to Will. It is Will's design after all.

What has previously been a hypothetical plan in Will's mind, is now the reality. He could still back out and let the man go. But Will is not going to do that. His conscience should have

come knocking long ago, but it never did.

Because he wants this.

He glances at the inconspicuous-looking bag of equipment on the back seat, containing protective gear, a small selection of restraints and paralytics, and an array of surgical tools. Will brought his gun too, despite Hannibal insisting with absolute certainty that he would not need to, or want to, use it on this trip. His SIG-Sauer has always felt comforting, with the way it sits against his hip or fits familiarly in his hands. Will is not going to use it, but having it around serves as an enticing reminder of the power he can hold over life and death, the things he can do with that power, and the laws and moral codes he can defy with his actions.

Yes, he wants this.

He moves his gaze to Hannibal, who meets his eyes with the kind of fondness and adoration that makes Will feel that what he is about to do is right. *Not necessarily right in the eyes of the law and morality, but perhaps right in his own eyes. And isn't that what most people aspire to be; to be true to their nature?*

He most definitely wants this.

Sergeant Sullivan is a pig - a misogynistic, racist, homophobic swine. A despicable douchebag who shoots and beats the people he deems freaks to assert his dominance, to hide how much of a spineless coward he really is. It would be very fitting for a spineless man to die a spineless death, Will thinks.

He can visualise it in his vivid imagination; pulling out the spine from the sergeant's body in one long, smooth movement, feeling the flesh around it rip and blood gushing out of the wound. Watching the repugnant man's body turn into a limp shapeless sack.

Unfortunately, the reality ends up being less dramatic than Will's fantasy, as Hannibal informs him that pulling out the spine as a whole is physically impossible due to too much connective tissue around it. Instead, he would have to remove each vertebra separately. It does not discourage Will, though. If anything, it makes the process more complex and intricate, and forces him to get his hands dirty. Quite literally.

There is blood everywhere, pooling inside the dead body and spilling out onto the table and all the way down Will's legs, soaking his socks and shoes. The sheer quantity of the scarlet-red liquid does not surprise him, considering that he had to cut open the entire backside, the laceration extending from the back of the man's skull to his pelvic bones, in order to expose the whole spine. Hannibal, who is playing surgeon's assistant, has the forceps ready when Will extends his hand, palm facing up expectantly.

If he were not cursed with his profound empathy that is sometimes inconvenient and unpredictable, Will could have become a real surgeon. He has nerves of steel and is not easily nauseated. And he finds people quite fascinating from the inside, when their consciousness is not in the way and trying to get inside his own head.

The cervical vertebrae separate fairly effortlessly from the rest of the body, and Will tosses them into the discard pile at the end of the table. The thoracic vertebrae are more difficult to extract, with the ribcage being in the way, but that is why they brought the bone saw. He lets Hannibal assist him with it, the real doctor placing his hands over Will's and guiding them in the right direction.

Will's mind flashes back to the first time he saw the Chesapeake Ripper work, carving out a man's body and turning it into a scarecrow in front of Will's eyes. He thought he had been blessed with a unique and invaluable performance then, unsuspecting of how much more he would end up seeing later. Though, in the back of his mind, Will always knew. He always knew where it would lead. Which was precisely why instead of capturing the Ripper after witnessing him commit a monstrous crime, he decided to let himself be seduced by that bloodlusting lifestyle.

Will always knew that it would lead to this. This. *The situation he does not yet have a name for. It is something that he can only describe as infinitely cruel, yet infinitely intimate. Hannibal's body is pressed against his backside, lips ghosting over his ear, explaining the intricacies of spinal column extraction using anatomical terms that Will is not familiar with. He simply gets lost in the voice, the tranquil and low hum, and watches their interlaced hands detach the remaining vertebrae with precise and competent movements. It is mesmerising and almost takes his breath away.*

"Have you ever seen blood in the moonlight, Will? It appears quite black."

"It's beautiful."

The admission is easy, it rolls off Will's tongue so naturally. Like it was always meant to be. Maybe he needed to return to the city of his beginnings to find himself. Maybe he was never lost in the first place.

Or maybe he decided on New Orleans because it is so far removed from his life in Virginia. It is far enough that he can pretend that their weekend trip was all a dream, a guilty pleasure, a dirty little secret. It is far enough that he can safely indulge in the dark part of him that feeds on sadism and violence, then leave it behind and drive away, without it following him back home. Though, Will should know better. He had already tried leaving that same part of himself in the cell at the Baltimore State Hospital, only for it to grow stronger.

Will should know better, and he does. He knows that what has been done cannot be undone. Evolution does not occur backwards; what he has become cannot be reversed. Moral compasses do not reroute after they have discovered their true north.

Will is used to having killers reside in his mind, their harsh voices whispering to him about their gruesome designs. It is only a matter of time before he would recognise one of those voices as his own; not a product of his empathic readings of others, but this time stemming from his innate nature. It fills his brain with his own designs, far more elaborate and spectacular than anything the other killers could produce.

In that moment, Will realises it. He has not become anything new; he has simply come to terms with what he has always been.

***

“Hey, sorry to bother you again… I think I left my key card here”, Will says with an apologetic smile as Penelope opens the front door of her house for him.

Earlier today, Will and Penelope had been brainstorming about the unsolved murder cases at Penelope’s place, fuelling their already sharp minds further with a glassful of high-quality wine. Will finds that doing it this way is far more enjoyable and relaxing than working on the cases at Quantico, which has an uncomfortably clinical and professional atmosphere; and, of course, is a dry zone. Besides, Jack does not seem to care where and how they do their profiling work, as long as they produce results.

Today, Will had left Penelope’s house in a hurry, after realising he had lost track of time and was going to be late to his evening lectures at the Academy. He had hastily gathered his belongings and himself, and his FBI key card must have slipped out of his pocket in the process.

“Oh. It must be somewhere in the lounge”, Penelope smiles back, inviting Will in to come find it, “And you didn’t finish your wine.”

“Yeah. Sorry for having to rush out like that. Time management isn’t my forte”, Will huffs, following her into the lounge room.

Penelope immediately spots the card and hands back it to him, along with his abandoned half-full glass. “You can finish it now.”

“It’s late”, Will protests politely, “I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“No, not at all. We were having such a good chat.”

“We were”, Will agrees, taking the glass.

“We were just getting on the topic of the Ripper, right?” Penelope asks, pouring herself a new serving of Sauvignon Blanc and topping up Will’s. “You said he let you know him.”

Will did not exactly plan on getting roped into another conversation tonight, after already spending hours talking to Penelope earlier in the afternoon. All he intended to do was quickly drop in and retrieve his key card. But now Penelope has mentioned the Ripper, and dodging the topic and leaving would look suspicious on Will’s part. So, he takes a sip of the wine and settles into his usual armchair by the fireplace.

“Or do you still think that if you start giving us hints about where he might strike next, he’s going to come after you?” Penelope continues.

“He would, I’m sure”, Will responds cautiously. “He lets me know him but he wouldn’t let me tell everyone else what I know.”

He takes a few nervous gulps of the wine, slipping into the mindset of a man who is a victim of the Ripper; someone who knows things but has to remain quiet in fear for his life.

“It’s not good for you to be dealing with him alone, Will”, Penelope says softly.

Will sighs and shakes his head. “I have no choice.”

“Does Hannibal know?”

“No. *Hell no*. I couldn’t put him in danger like that.”

Oh, the irony.

Completely oblivious, Penelope reaches to pat his arm reassuringly. Will meets her eyes and lets his mouth curl into a faint smile; a flawless image of a trapped man who is desperate for comfort, since he cannot confide in his partner.

“He’s messing with your head. Again.”

Penelope’s tone is warm and concerned, not the condescending kind that Will became accustomed to when he initially met her. It seems that she genuinely wants to help him. Will wants to simultaneously cry and laugh because of how clueless she is, because of how well he has played his part and pulled the wool over her eyes.

Or, perhaps, she still suspects him and Hannibal, but does not let it show. Maybe she hopes that letting them relax around her will cause one of them to slip up eventually. Unfortunately for Penelope, Will knows better than to trust anyone but Hannibal or to ever let his guard down completely.

“It’s different this time. He isn’t scared of me anymore”, he counters. It is not exactly a lie.

“He should be. Jack and I are going to help you catch him”, Penelope says in a determined voice.

That kind of voice makes Will’s stomach twist into a knot. He shifts and takes another sip from his glass, hoping the alcohol will soothe the anxiety gnawing on his insides at the thought of Penelope discovering who the Chesapeake Ripper really is.

“We’ve been trying for years. What makes you so confident that we’re going to catch him now?”

“I’ve got something he doesn't. The ability to *see* people. You see the Ripper, and I’m going to see him through you”, Penelope tells him.

The confidence in her voice is meant to sound soothing, but to Will it feels menacing. He tries his hardest to conceal a shudder. He may be warming up to Penelope, but he still hates those piercing X-ray eyes. Being fully seen by them, seen as the killer he is, and allowing her to see Hannibal, makes his insides freeze. Will stands up without realising, stepping closer to the fire to regain some warmth.

“So what, you’re going to get in my head and lie there in wait for when he comes around to mess with me?” he asks, tone still casual.

He has to maintain appearances, now more than ever.

“Something like that.”

“What makes you think I’ll let you in?” Will queries, his face involuntarily contorting into a frown.

“You already have”, she reveals with a casual smile.

With a sudden tightening in his chest, he realises that Penelope is right. But he forces his face to return her smile, and moves his gaze to the flames in the fireplace. The fire looks like streaks of orange on black background, like a swing of a pendulum he imagines in his mind when deconstructing crime scenes. Except this time the deconstruction plays out forward instead of backwards. All puzzle pieces suddenly come together to form the most obvious picture.

The bookend, made of stone, heavy and with sharp corners, sitting on top of the fireplace. The fire poker tool to the left of him, currently out of reach, but mere two steps away. The wine glass in his hand. Curtains pulled over all windows, so no one could see inside.

Awfully convenient.

“And now I realise that’s where I’ve made a mistake”, Will says slowly.

His eyes are still on the fire, serene facial expression unchanged, but his hands are already moving into the right position. He turns to face Penelope, hoping that maybe looking into her eyes will make his heart or brain run from the inevitable. But neither his heart nor brain hesitates.

So in a deliberate accident, Will drops the glass.

It shatters on the floor, making her look down instinctively. The momentary distraction is what Will needs, his hand wrapping around the bookend and smashing it into the side of Penelope’s head. It hits right above her left eye, splitting the skin and coating her forehead with blood.

She gulps in surprise as he lunges forward and grips her by the shoulders, wanting to swing her head into the brick wall of the fireplace. She pushes Will’s arms to the side in a practiced self-defense movement and kicks him in his ribcage. The force elicits a pained groan from him and sends him stumbling back a few steps. Will quickly realises he underestimated how well-versed Penelope must be in kickboxing and other kinds of combat. His back hits the wall of the fireplace, stopping his momentum, and he notices he is back to almost the same spot he initially stood in. Almost the same spot, just slightly to the side. What was mere two steps away before is now within reach.

A quick inhale is all Will has time for before Penelope pounces onto him again, giving him no chance to recover. He did attack her first after all. His brain is still lagging behind, trying to process everything that has happened in the past thirty seconds. But his hand is ready, gripping the fire poker. And when the distance between their bodies is just right, he thrusts it forward with all the force he can summon, driving it into her stomach.

The collision sends them both sideways against the wall, blood spurting out of Penelope's chest onto their hands and the floor. Will's own blood is added to the red and slippery mixture as she manages to punch him straight in the nose.

Will had been operating on autopilot up to this point, using the objects in the house as impromptu weapons, dodging and attacking like it is second nature. It is only when he tastes coppery crimson in his mouth that the bloodlust and certainty are unlocked in him. The certainty about what he is going to do.

He kicks her against the wall and to the ground, leaning in and twisting the fire poker around, still deep in her chest. It enlarges the wound and draws a guttural scream from her, blood freely pouring at a faster rate from around the metal rod. Penelope tries to get up, but he pushes her back down with a jab of his boot into her shoulder. Not to injure further, just as a warning.

Her chest is heaving where the fire poker is stuck, and she does not attempt to remove it. It would be impossible - and incredibly painful - to pull it out in a reverse motion, because of the hook on it.

Awfully convenient.

She pants and tries to wipe the blood that is dripping down from her head wound and obstructing her vision. When her eyes are no longer covered in a thick splatter of crimson, she meets Will's gaze. Their breathing happens in a reverse synchrony, one inhales while the other exhales. Penelope's eyes are full of venom and betrayal, but not surprise. And Will's are a bluish-green sea of everything and nothing; the usual whirlwind of emotions, but at the base of them all is that same certainty. Clearer than ever.

"The Chesapeake Ripper is Hannibal, isn't it? I knew it", Penelope manages to sound out in between the heavy gasps.

Will just kneels in front of her, gets their eyes more level, tilts his head to the side. Confirming or denying her statement would be redundant either way.

"And you're the Virginia Vigilante."

Her voice is weak from the pain and rapid blood loss, but the resentment and conviction are still there.

"Never liked the nickname", Will responds with a nonchalant shrug.

"You're a monster", she whispers and tries to get on her feet again. The attempt is so feeble that Will does not even bother to prevent it.

“Would you believe me if I told you I never wanted or intended to do this?” he asks, the question directed as much at himself as it is at her.

Because he has no desire to kill her. Not in the slightest. Not at all. Everything that led up to this moment just happened; the puzzle pieces came together on their own.

“I wouldn’t”, Penelope spits out, blood from her mouth landing on the front of Will’s shirt. He scrunches his face in disgust.

He thinks about her answer for a second, before speaking again.

“Me neither.”

He does not want to kill her. Does not want to kill her so badly that he does not have any other choice but to do it.

Penelope’s words echo in Will’s memory as he looks at the laceration on her head. *It takes a whole new kind of monster to split someone’s skull to get to the brain.*

And that he is. A whole new kind of monster.

Will’s hand finds the stony bookend again, and he drives it into Penelope’s head. Once, twice, thrice, however many times until he can see her skull, fractured from the repeated impact but still somehow held together. He pauses and drops the bookend. Grips the spot where the skull is fractured and drenched in outpouring blood - *with his hands* - until the bone crumples completely in his fist.

When he finally stands up, Penelope’s brown eyes are still staring at him, seeing him but not really *seeing* him; images imprinting onto the retina with no living brain to interpret them. She is finally seeing him for what he is now, when it is too late. And in his reflection in her now-lifeless eyes, Will sees it too.

“Good night, sleep tight”, Will coos, reciting their conversation from the other day, “The monster has decided to bite.”

Chapter End Notes

Was this development what everyone expected? Happy? Surprised? Shocked? Let me know in the comments!

I know the reasoning behind Will's gruesome actions is a little vague here, but I will explore his motivations and feelings further in the next chapter.

West-Northwest

Chapter Summary

> Will slowly nods at the mirror, greeting the new kind of monster he has become. The reflection nods back, mirroring Will's movements in perfect synchrony, as it should. Then, it pulls something out of his pocket.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wants to call Hannibal and tell him straight away, but he knows he can't. The network tower near Penelope's house would pick up the signal from his cell phone. He waits for the panic to envelope his mind and the shaking to overtake his body, but neither comes.

This is different from all the other times Will has killed. Before, it was never personal, never somebody he knew. He has only ever seen the general fear in his victims eyes, seeing him as an unnamed monster. But this time, he saw recognition, shock, and betrayal in Penelope's eyes as she learned that he was the wolf in sheep's clothing all along.

Will knows that this time should feel different. His horrific actions should be affecting him, brain catching up to what his body has done, realising that he took a life. Again. Though, this time he wiped someone that he knew from existence, leaving a blank spot in the space that she occupied in his life.

Will knows that he should be panicking. He did not plan this, did not know when exactly he was going to strike. Did not know exactly *that* he was going to strike, until the split-second before his hand closed around that bookend. This was not meticulously planned, no plastic coverings or gloves, no elaborate plans and weeks of preparation. This was something unpredictable.

Yet, Will feels calm. No trembling hands and no cold sweat. No guilt and no remorse? It is too early to tell. He needs to let the cacophony of emotions settle before he can see the clear picture of what he is feeling. So, for now, Will switches on the autopilot in his brain and goes through his usual routine of cleaning up crime scenes, repeated so many times previously that by now it has become fully automated.

He thinks it all through, rewinds his steps backwards in his imagination, just like every time he sees a crime scene at his job. Blood patterns, signs of struggle, the shattered wine glasses on the floor, dents on the wall where their bodies had landed. He wipes his fingerprints off the most incriminating pieces of evidence; the blood-covered bookend and the fire poker, still sticking out of Penelope Rivas's now lifeless body.

Will is not overly concerned about leaving his fingerprints or DNA in other parts of the house. There is bound to be a hair of his found somewhere, but it would not look suspicious because he had visited the house earlier today. He could easily prove it; multiple people at the BSU heard him explain that he had left his key card at Penelope's. Somehow, he has unknowingly arranged things to help himself there.

Awfully convenient.

Was it unknowingly after all? Will is not sure.

He takes care of the security camera next. He had spotted it the first time he stepped into Penelope's house. Not on purpose; rather as a semi-automatic habit that he developed when he started killing. Always noticing the digital eyes watching him, subconsciously positioning himself out of view as much as possible.

Will sees his reflection in the little black fisheye lens of the camera. It looks like a twisted metaphor for his soul; darkened and distorted.

He heads to the bathroom, washes the blood off his arms and hands, looks in the mirror. The Will in the mirror stares back at him. Watching his reflection, he takes off his blood-stained sweater to reveal a spotless button-up shirt underneath. There are a few droplets of blood on the collar, but it is nothing his scarf cannot easily hide. It is amusing that today of all days he decided to bring a scarf, even though the weather is not particularly cold.

Awfully convenient, again.

He takes a minute or two to fix his untidy hair and to clean the blood from his face. Apart from the fresh gashes and bruising on his nose where Penelope punched him, the Will in the mirror looks like a perfectly composed and groomed man, without a single sign pointing to the gruesome act he just committed. Will slowly nods at the mirror, greeting the new kind of monster he has become.

The reflection nods back, mirroring Will's movements in perfect synchrony, as it should. Then, it pulls something out of his pocket. A compass. Will feels both his hands resting at his sides, motionless and empty. He figures that the man in the mirror must be a product of his overly vivid imagination. It seems similar to the hallucinations he started having after killing Hobbs, the first life he took.

The Will in the mirror lifts the compass up, the arrow spinning frantically. He looks at the broken device, thinking back to the moral compass metaphor Hannibal always used. The words Hannibal had said to him years ago echo in Will's mind, perfectly imprinted in his eidetic memory.

"The direction your moral compass points at the moment can contradict with the direction of where you want to go. As conflicting as it may be, don't let it sway you off the course set by your true nature."

Will understands it more now than he did when he first heard it. Every person he killed has caused his moral compass to lose its bearings. But eventually, the needle always finds a new

direction. His own moral code. His true north.

He glances at the mirror again, unsurprised to see that the compass in the hand of his reflection has stopped spinning. The Will in the mirror looks peaceful. Like a person that has achieved harmony with all parts of himself, even the ones most would consider ugly.

Even though his hallucinations were cured along with the encephalitis, Will's overactive imagination still sometimes paints absurd pictures in front of his eyes. But this time, it feels more truthful than absurd. He is looking at the reflection of himself after all, seeing himself for who he truly is. For who he has always been.

***

It is almost midnight when Will walks through the door. Immediately, he can tell that Hannibal senses the blood and the violence radiating from him before he even notices the bruise decorating Will's face.

"What happened, darling?" Hannibal asks, looking at Will with a concerned expression, "What did you do?"

Hannibal knows the answer, no doubt, but he wants to hear Will say it.

"I killed Penelope Rivas."

Will is surprised at how calm his voice is, as if he is talking about something trivial like the state of the weather. It has been well over two hours since Penelope took her last breath, and Will still feels empty, his usual whirlwind of emotions nowhere to be seen.

He knows that it can take a while for emotional awareness to resurface after undergoing a dramatic and life-threatening event. Though, normally, it never takes this long. There is always something in Will's head, a plethora of feelings dancing around and mixing together. But this time, he feels nothing; no shock at his actions, no regret for what he has done, no relief that Penelope is not a threat to them anymore, no fear of being caught after his spontaneous burst of reckless savagery. The absolute quiet in his mind is unusual and eerie.

Hannibal seems somewhat surprised by Will's confession, amber-brown eyes looking at him with their typical boundless curiosity.

"How did that happen?" he queries softly, as if tiptoeing around the edge of the subject.

Understandably so, since Will's emotionless tone and blank facial expression are making it impossible for Hannibal to gauge how his lover feels about this unexpected turn of events.

"She tried to get inside my head. I didn't want that. So I got inside hers first", Will deadpans.

"You did?"

“Well, I crushed her skull.”

Will chooses to sound brute and unembellished on purpose, hoping that saying the crude words out loud will finally awaken emotions in him. Is it going to be a sadistic monster that enjoys what Will did? Or is it going to be his conscience screaming in terror? Will would welcome either with open arms; having absolutely anything or anyone inhabiting his mind would be better than the unsettling void of nothingness.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow at Will’s choice of words too, studying him with his inquisitive eyes.

“How was it?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I felt nothing. I still feel nothing”, Will admits in a half-whisper.

He is begging and pleading with his entire being - his voice, his eyes, his soul. Though, he is not sure what he is begging for. For Hannibal to snap his fingers and magically give Will emotions? He is not even sure what emotions he would like to have.

Hannibal frowns and closes the distance between them. He lifts his hand to caress Will’s face, as if trying to find the cracks in the shackles of emotionlessness that are enveloping his beloved. Will closes his eyes and leans into the touch, letting Hannibal’s skilled hands untie the mask of dispassion from his face and let him feel something. *Anything*.

Although it does not necessarily help Will feel anything about another body on his conscience, Hannibal’s touch is immensely comforting. Will wants to melt into the man, crawl into his embrace and stay in it forever, ignoring the expectations of the outer world as well as his inner world.

“You were always adamant that you didn't want to do it. What changed?” Hannibal probes gently, still holding Will in his arms.

Will is not sure how to answer that. He did not plan on harming Penelope, it just happened; all the countless ‘what ifs’ converged into one clear reality, and in that moment he knew exactly what he was going to do. Maybe Will wanted to do it, maybe he did not, maybe in his mind he knew he was always going to, but kept running from that thought and pushing it deep into the unconscious.

“I didn’t want to *plan* to do it”, he utters eventually.

It almost does not make sense to Will himself, but Hannibal seems to understand exactly what he is trying to say.

“Not consciously, no. When you’ve taken a life enough times, you’ll find that at the back of your mind you’re always planning. Always setting up an alibi, always arranging the evidence in your favour. So when the opportunity comes, you are ready. It’s quite fascinating how one is already a killer before even performing the act.”

Will's eyes widen at the weight of the meaning in Hannibal's words. There is something thoroughly petrifying about the realisation that he can murder people without stopping to think about it first, operating without conscious thoughts like a machine. It is as if killing has become casual to him, like an everyday routine, a monstrous habit. No more hesitation, deliberation, battling with his morals, agonising over never-ending questions of 'should I?' and 'could I?'

Suddenly, it is not odd anymore that Will cannot seem to feel any emotions about it. Machines do not have feelings. Neither do monsters.

Will struggles to hold back a shudder that shakes his entire body. Perhaps, despite being adamant that he did not want to kill Penelope, it was just a matter of time before he did. Perhaps, he has evolved into the kind of remorseless villain you see in movies, the most ruthless criminal everyone at his job is trying to catch. Will should find himself revolting, be disgusted by what he has become, terrified even, but instead he still feels empty.

"You've reached the imago stage, my love. The final stage of your metamorphosis", Hannibal murmurs gently.

Will is stunned by the stark contrast between Hannibal's perception of him and how he sees himself. Of course, it does not surprise him that Hannibal can see beauty in cruelty, but when it is in relation to Will, it sometimes still astounds him.

Will meets Hannibal's eyes with a quiet nod. Through his empathy, or simply because he knows his partner so well, he can see himself the way Hannibal sees him; beautiful and powerful in all his glory, not only embracing what has always lain within, but letting it shine through every cell of his body. And it is all Hannibal has ever wanted for him, for Will to reach his full potential. *The final stage of his becoming*.

Will clears his throat, rolls his shoulders and flexes his fingers, as if testing the fit of the new skin he has evolved into. It feels natural; maybe he was born with it and has always worn it underneath his person-suit. Now, he can see himself shedding that person-suit like a snake shedding its skin, becoming something deadlier and more venomous than he previously was.

"Is this why you do it? To feel nothing? To have peace and quiet?" he asks then.

"Sometimes", Hannibal responds pensively. "Though, because your empathy is vastly more heightened than mine, the calming effect of killing would be much more potent for you than for me."

"It's tremendous", Will agrees.

"But is it good?"

"I'm not sure. It's odd."

"It must be exhausting to constantly be experiencing so many emotions. It's no wonder that you are compelled to give your brain a rest at times."

“That means I’m *sick*...” Will mumbles.

The new skin suddenly feels constricting, uncomfortably chafing his limbs, scorching his flesh. Like the straitjacket he was forced to wear in prison.

Sick, abnormal, pathological, mentally ill, deranged, outright *crazy*. There are many ways to describe a person who is only able to make his head shut up by killing others. It is gruesome, it is ugly, it is wrong. It is one thing to engage in it because he enjoys it, to indulge his hedonistic desires by ridding the world of bad people. It is a whole another thing to murder someone in cold blood just to feel *normal*.

“No, darling, not in the slightest. Just desensitised, that’s all”, Hannibal objects softly, sensing Will’s discomfort. Then, there is a soothing hand on Will’s lower back, rubbing circles into the tense flesh.

“It’s all about neural mechanisms”, Hannibal continues, “When you take a life, you are overfilled with extreme emotions. The abundant mirror neurons in your brain fire so rapidly that it exceeds your threshold of perception, which in turn, results in you feeling nothing.”

Will looks at him skeptically, unsure if the scientific-sounding explanation Hannibal is giving him has any real merit. His empathy condition is unique after all, and the neurobiology of it has hardly ever been researched before.

“I suppose”, he responds, not as convinced as he would hope to be.

“Think of the sound of a dog whistle. The pitch is so high that it’s inaudible to human ears, but the sound is there, and dogs can hear it. Your emotions are the same; intensified beyond your range of perception, but still there. It doesn’t make you a deviant or heartless.”

Will nods, processing the information. It is amazing how Hannibal can liken complicated scientific explanations to something related to dogs, so that Will can understand them more easily.

“So, am I going to feel nothing when killing for the rest of my life now?” Will asks, increasingly not fond of the idea, “What would be the point of doing it then?”

Hannibal’s hand is cupping his face again, thumb gently rubbing over Will’s tense jaw.

“Not quite. Your brain is going to adapt to this overbearing emotional response by reducing the sensitivity of your mirror neurons. You will feel again, but likely not as intensely as before. Isn’t that what you want, to have your level of empathy reduced from high to normal?”

“Yeah, that would be ideal. It makes sense when you put it that way”, Will concedes, too tired to resist Hannibal’s efforts to make him feel better about himself.

He expresses his appreciation by planting a soft kiss on Hannibal’s lips. He lingers for longer than he planned to, his sensation-starved body deepening the kiss, looking for some kind of

emotion to latch onto. It feels like home, not only because it's Hannibal, but because it fills the quiet void in Will's mind.

"It was strange for me too, disturbing almost", Hannibal reveals when their lips part, his soft voice vibrating against Will's cheek, "the first time I killed someone whom I knew well. It was different from the rest. I felt emptiness instead of satisfaction. I later grew to like it, though. There is something very precious about the tranquility of the mind."

"Yeah. It's just weird to have my head be so quiet. I'm so used to feeling things all the time."

Will kisses Hannibal again with the same passion, lips eventually trailing to his neck as if of their own volition. In a matter of seconds, the gentle aimless nuzzling escalates into a touch with a clear agenda.

"Well, if it helps, I could make you feel *certain things*", Hannibal whispers, mouth brushing Will's ear.

The tingling sensation sends a shiver down Will's spine, right into his groin. He grinds his hips against Hannibal instinctively, and with that, he suddenly has a revelation.

Maybe this is exactly what he needs. Maybe Will is not desensitised to killing, but simply clamped up, shut off, wound tight with tension. Maybe all his emotions are there, just temporarily buried under his too powerful self-control and rationality.

What if all Hannibal needs to do is to unlock Will, the way he has done a million times before? Loosen him up with gentle and skillful fingers, make him sigh, gasp and moan, paving the way for the precious emotions to spill from his heart and out through his mouth. Or crack him open with rough teeth and brutal thrusts of hips, shatter him into pieces and free the feelings that are pent up inside him.

It is worth a try, so Will lets a hungry whine escape from his throat and pushes his growing erection against Hannibal's thigh.

Their feet lead them to the lounge room, headed for the lavish plush couch. The bed upstairs is too far away while Hannibal is right here, Will is already working on pulling off his clothes, and there is too much heat and not enough patience in either of them to take the stairs. Will's back meets the silky-soft material of the couch, followed by the warm, heavy weight of Hannibal's body on top of his.

There is the electrifying touch of Hannibal's hands across Will's bare chest, the sharp nip of his teeth on Will's neck, the familiar warm wave of arousal gathering in Will's stomach. It is a relief to know that he is not completely numb and can feel something - the things that really matter. He relaxes under the sensual ministrations of his lover and lets pleasure take residence in his mind.

Hannibal's touches are exploring, searching, probing; tentative sequences of caresses, kisses, scratches and bites placed onto different parts of Will's body. It seems that he is trying to find the correct combination to unlock the emotionality Will is struggling to find in himself, determined to locate a hidden lever to uncover a secret compartment where those feelings are

stashed. Will tries to help him the best he can, responding to the touches with cascades of eager breaths and needy sounds, and letting his hands roam his beloved's body in return.

Will wraps his arms around Hannibal's back, tracing the curves of the muscles there. His fingers travel to the waistband of Hannibal's pants, thankful for the late hour because it means the man is not wearing his usual belt or suspenders, which are a pain to undo. The sensation of Will's hand slipping inside the loose lounge pants elicits an enthusiastic mixture of growl and moan from Hannibal, which in turn heats up Will's body further.

The mind-numbing effect of arousal is quick and effective, and Will finds himself not thinking about Penelope anymore, not thinking about the gory mess he turned her into, not thinking about how on earth he is going to get away with this when the body is eventually discovered.

Then, Will stalls, suddenly remembering the plan he haphazardly pieced together on his drive home.

"Hannibal, wait", he breathes out. "There's something we've got to do."

Hannibal pauses, pulls back from where he was diligently sucking a constellation of bruises onto Will's neck, and looks at him expectantly. Will chews on the words in his mouth before speaking them out loud, unsure of how they will be received.

"I need you to beat me up", he says.

Instead of responding, Hannibal blinks at him in confusion.

Chapter End Notes

Now i'm curious to hear people's thoughts on Will's emotional reaction to killing Penelope (or, well, the lack thereof, haha!)

North-West

Chapter Summary

> “If this was a real fight, this is where you’d die”, Will points out, leaning down to bring their faces close, eye to eye.
>
> The physical exertion is making his chest heave and his body tremble all over, but his hand that holds the blade is steady.
>
> “If this was a real fight, I wouldn’t have let you overpower me”, Hannibal counters with a smug expression on his face.

Chapter Notes

> Hello, this is the last full length chapter before the epilogue. I can't believe this fic is almost done!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I need you to beat me up, Hannibal. You know, punch me, hit me, kick my ass.”

Hannibal continues to stare at his beloved with a puzzled expression on his face. There is fire in Will’s eyes, adrenaline rushing under his skin, and he talks using his hands in an animated fashion.

“We need to make it look like the killer - supposedly the Vigilante - came here to try to kill me after killing Penelope. Because we got too close to discovering who he is. It would make sense for him to try to kill us both in the same night.

“I see”, Hannibal nods as Will’s plan becomes clear to him. “You need an alibi for agent Rivas’s death, so we’ll pretend the same killer attacked you too. I like that you have thought this through.”

“Yeah”, Will confirms, rubbing the back of his neck, “It also means that I’m going to need to beat you up too.”

His tone is more cautious now, tentative, as if expecting Hannibal to be bothered by the premise and refuse.

But Hannibal does neither of those things. If they are to stage an attack on their home, it makes sense for him to be involved in the fight too, to defend his partner.

He has never fought Will before, not physically, a few playful tussles aside. This is different, and although still not a real fight, it needs to look serious enough to convince the FBI that they both narrowly escaped being murdered by a vicious serial killer. Being largely experienced in close combat and possessing enough anatomical and medical knowledge, Hannibal is confident that he can ensure all the damage sustained in their little scheme will be controlled and will not result in permanent injury or disfigurement.

“You have my permission. This is your design.”

With that said, the preparation begins. They change into pyjamas, make sure the dogs stay asleep by feeding them meat mixed with carefully-measured sedative, and briefly choreograph their encounter with the imaginary killer. Then, they dive headfirst into executing the final part of Will’s design.

“Let’s say this one is a male, around thirty, blond hair, hazel eyes, strong build, taller than you but shorter than me. To help you visualise it in your mind”, Hannibal suggests.

He is describing the law student he has been shaping to fit the Virginia Vigilante profile for months. Will nods, not questioning where the description came from.

“I’m awakened by strange sounds in the house, so I go out into the corridor”, Hannibal begins their narration of the self-made crime scene, “The intruder is already there, waiting for me. He attempts to wrestle me quietly.”

Will does as instructed and presses a hand over Hannibal’s mouth, the other hand gripping his throat, fingers tightening around it immediately. Hannibal does not waste time with his defense and rotates their bodies around in a sharp movement, causing Will to nearly trip over his own feet. His hand slips from Hannibal’s mouth in the process. That seemed way too easy.

“Fight like you mean it”, Hannibal sneers with a condescending look on his face.

He says the words to deliberately frustrate Will; if they are going to put on a spectacle where they fight for their lives, they have to give it their best performance. It works.

Will narrows his eyes at the provocation and closes both of his hands around Hannibal's throat, compressing it with an unforgiving force. One part of Hannibal appraises his beloved with pride, while the other part instinctively tries to rip Will’s hands off his neck. Will’s fingers do not budge.

For lack of a better defense in the moment, Hannibal resorts to kneeing Will in the stomach. The impact makes Will almost double over from pain, but he quickly retaliates by shoving Hannibal’s head into the wall. Hard. Payback for his earlier condescending mockery, Hannibal deduces.

The collision of Hannibal’s skull with the wall creates a loud sound. So much for wrestling quietly. Hannibal’s ears are ringing due to the blow, and the floor spins for a while, until his vestibular system recovers. After he regains his balance, it is time to move to stage two of their choreography.

“The man hears you awaken, so he leaves me and focuses on you”, Hannibal narrates, pushing their still interlaced bodies into the bedroom.

He kicks Will’s leg, heel to the back of Will’s knee, causing it to bend. Will collapses on the floor with a grunt, Hannibal on top.

“The attacker disorients you with a punch”, Hannibal continues, giving Will a two-second warning before his fist collides with Will’s jaw.

Penelope has already left a nasty bruise on Will’s face, which Hannibal despises greatly. So naturally, he decides to cover the mark with his own, and hits Will right in the nose. Will groans at the sensation of his nose being abused for the second time this evening. Blood immediately pours out of it, coating his mouth and making him cough.

The sight of the mesmerising crimson-red gracing Will’s beautiful features riles Hannibal up even more, so he pulls out a knife. As he contemplates where to strike, he looks down at Will’s dishevelled form on the floor underneath him, blinking rapidly and spitting out blood, while looking so ferocious and delightful.

“I kick the guy in the gut, making him drop the knife”, Will growls.

Immediately, he jams his foot into Hannibal's abdomen. It hits him in the vulnerable spot right underneath his ribs, making him see stars.

As his breath is knocked out of him, Hannibal realises that he really should have focused more on maintaining the upper hand instead of being distracted by how good his partner looks covered in blood. In his defense, it is the first time they are physically fighting each other, so the experience is rather novel.

Before Will can cause any more damage to the imaginary attacker that Hannibal is impersonating, he swings his fist in Will’s general direction. It lands on his chest, but not with as much force as intended. This gives Will the opportunity to tackle Hannibal and retaliate by punching him in the face, evening the score. They end up wrestling on the ground for a moment, laying punches and kicks on each other in a sharp and erratic fashion, like a jumpy image on a broken TV.

After noticing they have moved closer to the nightstand, Will manages to open one of the draws.

“As soon as I get a chance, I reach for my gun -”, he splutters, hastily pulling out the weapon.

“But the attacker kicks it out of your hand”, Hannibal intervenes, cutting Will’s motion short.

They watch as Hannibal’s foot flings the gun across the floor to the other side of the room, out of reach, almost like in slow-motion.

Hannibal stands up and switches roles from the attacker back to himself, re-entering the fight from the corridor. “In the meantime, I come back into the room and try to help you fight off

the killer."

"He has the knife again", Will improvises, assuming the role of the intruder, the blade already in his hand. "You two try to wring it out of each other's grip."

Hannibal is ready, picking up the first object he can find - a book - and hurling it at Will. He uses the momentary distraction to lunge at the imaginary killer Will is posing as and tackle him to the ground, before the killer has time to swing the knife.

Will swings it anyway as he goes down, the edge of the blade cutting through the sleeve of Hannibal's silk pyjama shirt and cutting a wound into his arm. The sharp stinging sensation elicits an animalistic growl from Hannibal's throat, and he traps Will's arm under his knee to get a hold of the knife. It seems easier than expected to wring the weapon out of Will's hand, and Hannibal is almost disappointed.

Until he feels Will's teeth sink into his upper arm.

Hannibal yelps in pain and jerks his arm away from Will's vicious grip. Will, of course, uses the distraction to his advantage and flips them around. Hannibal ends up on his back on the floor, with Will straddling his middle. Since that knife is still in Will's hand, he does the only sensible thing in that moment, and presses it against Hannibal's throat.

Considering his rather disadvantaged position, Hannibal stops fighting and resorts to simply glaring at Will, eyes full of challenge and defiance.

"If this was a real fight, this is where you'd die", Will points out, leaning down to bring their faces close, eye to eye.

The physical exertion is making his chest heave and his body tremble all over, but his hand that holds the blade is steady.

"If this was a real fight, I wouldn't have let you overpower me", Hannibal counters with a smug expression on his face.

"Bullshit", Will argues. "I won, fair and squa–"

The rest of Will's words are muffled when Hannibal reaches up and clashes their lips together. The kiss feels like a continuation of the fight; all teeth, biting as hard as possible, drawing blood, as if there is not enough already pouring out of Will's busted nose. Will attacks Hannibal's mouth with unforgiving fury, gnawing on his bottom lip and pinching it hard with his teeth, tasting pure animalistic desire. Hannibal could almost get lost in it, relishing in the maddeningly delicious flavour of Will's blood on his tongue, if he did not have other plans.

He maneuvers his hands slowly, careful to remain undetected by Will for now, and only makes his intentions known as he drags the blade of the knife - now in his possession - across Will's thigh. Will breaks the kiss with a shocked cry, looking down at the bleeding laceration on his leg. It is not deep enough to cause a permanent scar, but there is enough blood to look like it was inflicted with malicious intent.

“You got distracted, darling”, Hannibal smirks at him.

“Asshole”, Will hisses.

“In my defense, you cut me first.”

As a retaliation, Will attacks Hannibal’s mouth again, but with his fist instead of lips this time.

The next few minutes are spent throwing more punches and kicks around. Though, with the knife now involved, they focus more on carefully slicing each other’s skin. Blades and fresh blood bring in more intimacy, and the previous brutal conviction of their brawl gains a flirtatious flavour. The atmosphere in the room is still very raw and physical, but now in a completely different way. Hannibal finds that he would much rather be sweating, grunting and exerting his body with a different purpose, and he is sure that Will feels the same.

So, Hannibal rises to his feet and wipes the blood from his hands onto his now-ruined silk pyjama pants. His attempt at cleaning himself up is pointless as he is still bleeding everywhere, and the cuts on his legs, arms and chest immediately coat his body in red again. His head is throbbing from when it hit the wall, and his muscles ache from the strain and bruising inflicted by Will’s ministrations. Hannibal decides that it is time to conclude their staged fight spectacle.

“I manage to finally reach the gun”, he narrates, crossing the room, “and I attempt to shoot the attacker in self-defense…”

“...But you miss”, Will interrupts, “you haven’t handled a gun in ages, so you’re a *terrible* shot.” Will drawls the words out teasingly, still sprawled on the floor on his back.

Hannibal cocks an eyebrow, then cocks the gun, and aims it loosely in the direction of Will and the imaginary attacker.

“A terrible shot, you say?” he questions smugly and pulls the trigger.

Flawlessly aimed, the bullet pierces precisely through the beam that is holding up the wooden shelf above Will’s head, shattering the beam into pieces. Will gets half a second warning before the shelf collapses onto him and the imaginary intruder.

Will tries to propel his arms and feet up to soften the impact, but the wooden board still manages to hit his head, the small statuettes and other decor falling down and hitting the floor and his body. He groans and holds a hand to his injured head. It is undoubtedly going to bruise soon, and Hannibal hopes the blow was not serious enough to cause a concussion.

“The man flees before I try to shoot him again”, Hannibal concludes.

Will nods satisfactorily. They catch their breaths for a moment, taking in the mess they caused in the room, as well as all the blood and bruises they decorated each other with. The air is heavy with sweat, adrenaline and that sweet kind of tension that only one thing can relieve.

In less than a blink of an eye they are back on the floor, mouths clashing together and limbs entwined, frantically ripping off the blood-soaked clothes like it is a matter of life and death.

“Hold on. I’ve got to do the last part”, Will manages to pant out, already half-naked – courtesy of Hannibal’s quick hands.

He reaches for his phone on the nightstand and dials a familiar number. Hannibal does not let Will’s preoccupation stop him, and he swiftly rids Will of his pants and underwear, all while sucking more bruises onto his lover’s neck.

“Jack, it’s Will. Hannibal and I have been attacked”, Will whimpers, trying his hardest to hold back the moans elicited by Hannibal’s ministrations, “I think h-he’s –”

Will’s sentence is cut short by the choked sound he makes when Hannibal wraps his mouth around his fully formed erection.

“You have to send someone to Penelope’s house, *now* !” Will yelps and hangs up, glaring at Hannibal in disbelief.

Hannibal only smiles innocently in response from where he is settled between his partner’s legs. There is nothing wrong with causing Will to sound exceptionally out of breath on the phone. If anything, it only makes his lies seem more realistic.

***

The next few hours are a whirlwind of events.

The ambulance and police arrive at their house in no time. Will holds Hannibal’s hand as they huddle under orange comfort blankets, the paramedics tending to their wounds. When Jack enters the room, Will spills the fabricated story about being ambushed by the armed killer in the middle of the night, narrowly managing to fight him off only with his and Hannibal’s efforts combined.

After that, they anxiously wait for updates from the squad that was sent to Penelope’s house after Will alerted them she is in danger. All too late, of course.

Will does not get to shut his eyes until after the sun has already risen. He sleeps for no more than two hours, his mind too agitated to rest properly. Penelope’s body has already been discovered at her house and taken away, but Will insists to go see the scene, despite Jack and Hannibal’s protests. They both think it is going to break him - albeit for different reasons.

It does not break him, does not even come close.

It feels just like a regular day in the life of a criminal profiler that doubles as a serial killer; deconstructing yet another murder of his own making.

There is slight uneasiness creeping up Will's spine and twisting his stomach into knots as he steps back into the house where the fatal events took place. His paranoia tells him he messed up at the crime scene somehow, left evidence or identifying information. Will deduces that his anxious state of mind is probably further exacerbated by the sleep deprivation and the minor concussion from getting hit on the head by the collapsed shelf. Thankfully, Hannibal is there to support him in more ways than one. His hand that is holding Will's is warm and comforting, and he examines the scene with his watchful eyes, making sure that Will made no mistakes.

The shock and sorrow at losing a colleague is thick in the air and weighs heavy on everyone's faces, including Will's. He welcomes it, lets himself feel disturbed and distraught too. Somehow, it feels natural to be deeply saddened by Penelope's death, despite being the one that caused it. Will lets the emotion course through him. Being able to feel things makes him feel like himself again, and makes it easier to perform his usual analysis of the murder scene.

After that, he, Hannibal and Jack head straight into the station to give their official statements about what they remember from the attack, while it is still fresh in their minds. Hannibal's person-suit is flawlessly put together, as always. He expertly feigns distress about being almost killed last night, and expresses displeasure about having to retell the traumatic events to the FBI instead of getting their well-deserved rest. Will's well-being is Hannibal's main concern, so he insists that they go home, adamant that his partner has been through enough already.

Will, however, decides to act like his usual stubborn self and disregards Hannibal's concerns. He chugs down his third coffee for the day, rubs his exhausted and bloodshot eyes and insists that "he is fine", that he "needs to do his job" and that he *"owes this to Penelope".* After he says the last part, nobody, not even Hannibal, dares to keep trying to dissuade him.

Will narrates what happened at Hannibal's house with precise details, in his typical fashion, using his insights to help Jack one last time. Jack has him and Hannibal provide their witness accounts alone, one after the other, but it does not alarm Will. Of course, he and Hannibal had discussed their testimonies in advance to ensure they would not contradict each other.

Will uses the generic description of the attacker that Hannibal invented: "*male, mid twenties to early thirties, blond hair, hazel eyes, lean but not too broad, similar height and physique to yours, Will".* It makes perfect sense that the wounds inflicted on Penelope, Hannibal and himself would be by a man of similar build to Will's.

"I just can't believe it", Jack huffs once they are finished with their testimonies. "There were two of you - may I add that I know both of you have killed a man before in self-defense - yet somehow this guy still escaped?"

Will opens his mouth, ready to come up with an excuse along the lines of 'we'd been asleep' or 'I didn't have my gun ready', but Hannibal's response comes faster.

"This killer is an esteemed fighter, thus the encounter was more defense than attack-focused on Will and I's part. Were we not experienced enough in close combat to adequately protect ourselves, we wouldn't be here right now", Hannibal explains calmly.

Of course, Hannibal is able to frame everything so that it sounds like a heroic survival rather than a failed opportunity to capture a criminal, making their efforts seem a lot more dignified than any of Will's excuses would. Will takes Hannibal's hand in his and squeezes it affectionately, suddenly feeling extremely fortunate to be dating such an intelligent man.

"Still, we haven't found a single foreign fingerprint or piece of DNA in the house yet", Jack says, skepticism and frustration evident in his features.

"He is very careful, made sure to be covered in protective gear from head to toe", Hannibal points out delicately.

"We know what he looks like now, Jack. We will catch him", Will adds in a reassuring tone.

Jack pauses and rubs his temples. Will knows the man enough to see that he still finds this whole scenario unrealistic, but at least they have given him something substantial to focus on.

"Let's go see the sketch artist right now then", Jack decides, practically steering Will and Hannibal towards the forensic sketch artist's office.

"No, I must insist that we do this later", Hannibal protests, "Will is exhausted and I am not feeling quite like myself either."

Both Jack and Will begin to object with their respective arguments:

"Hannibal, there is no time -"

"Hannibal, darling, I'm fine."

However, Hannibal is unrelenting. Although still poised and polite in his typical fashion, he makes it abundantly clear that it is pointless for either man to argue with him. Not that Will wants to argue - he wants to go to sleep more than anything - but he has to act like his stubborn self as not to create further suspicion.

"We can provide the sketch profile tomorrow. You will not lose any important details, since Will's memory is eidetic, and mine is quite accurate too. We must go rest now."

There is such undisputable finality in Hannibal's voice that nobody protests. Jack concedes with a sigh, and Will lets his partner lead him out of the building.

***

Everyone at Quantico is shaken up by Penelope's tragic death. Will is too, despite being the immediate catalyst to it. Over the next few days, his emotionality is restored to its full extent, allowing him to experience multiple feelings at once.

Will attends the funeral, celebrates her life and achievements, and mourns her death. He feels grief about losing such a brilliant colleague. He feels sorry for her family. He feels relieved that she is not picking at his brain anymore. He feels glad that he got to know Penelope, and even feels proud that she almost caught the Chesapeake Ripper - while personally ensuring that she paid for that privilege with her life.

Will feels strong-willed and powerful, knowing that he is capable of doing whatever necessary to ensure his and Hannibal's safety. He feels wary because, although no one suspects him of killing her, one piece of evidence is all it takes to change everyone's minds. He feels many different emotions, all equally potent.

There is a plethora of emotions that should be in conflict with each other, each trying to overpower the others and come out on top, making Will unsettled and unsure of what it is that he is feeling. Instead, ever since he made that split-second decision to attack Penelope, the emotions have not been fighting for dominance anymore, but peacefully co-existing alongside each other. Will supposes that Hannibal was right; premeditated murder does not make one devoid of human emotions. It just adds another layer of them.

It is perfectly possible to enjoy killing someone and simultaneously feel sad about their death. Just like it is possible to enjoy eating a delicious meal to the point of feeling sick, and not regret it despite the uncomfortable fullness in the stomach. Having complex emotions about killing does not make Will a more horrible man than he already is, just a more complicated one.

A man that sets his own moral code and lives by it.

Weeks roll past, and everything settles into the familiar sense of normalcy. Except that nothing is the same anymore. When Will hands in his resignation letter, Jack appears less surprised than anticipated. Will explains that after witnessing the most horrifying effects of the job he is doing; after losing his fellow profiler and almost losing Hannibal to a vicious serial killer, there is no way he can keep going and putting his partner in danger. Jack is disappointed, probably wanting to say that they need Will's killer-catching skills now more than ever, but does not have the heart to object.

They decide to move away. Move away from the dangerous lifestyle haunted by killers and bloodshed - or so they make it sound - and settle somewhere different. Will is not yet sure where they are heading, but he does not mind not knowing the exact direction, as long as he is on this journey with Hannibal.

Wherever the move is going to take them, and wherever Will's newly-aligned moral compass will point, he knows that it will be in harmony with his truest, deepest desires.

Chapter End Notes

Is anyone surprised that this is how Will ended up getting away with murder?

North-Northwest (Epilogue)

Chapter Summary

> “I’d like to take you to Florence,” Hannibal says. “You’ve shown me New Orleans, the place of your beginning. Now I’d like to show you the city of *my* beginning.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal’s office looks unusually empty without paintings gracing the walls and books lining the shelves. Some furniture still remains, but soon it will be loaded into the moving truck Hannibal has hired. He and Will are finishing up packing, making sure everything is ready before the removalists arrive.

Hannibal is going through the detailed catalogue of all his belongings that he has compiled, while Will begins transferring the contents of an ornate antique cabinet into a cardboard box. He thought the task would be complicated and require separating valuable possessions from unneeded objects that can be discarded into trash, such as broken pens or wall calendars from previous years. However, he should have known that Hannibal is always meticulously organised and does not accumulate unnecessary junk, unlike everyone else.

Will fills the box with all kinds of peculiar paraphernalia, such as a book in Braille, several paper knives, and a set of tiny screwdrivers which he can only assume are used to repair wrist watches or glasses. Then, one particular object catches his attention.

A small, pocked-sized compass. Round, made of shining golden metal, with a long chain attached to it, making it resemble a large medallion. Will curls his hand around the compass, feeling the intricate engravings on the metal casing under his fingertips.

It is a beautiful artefact and reminds Will of the concept of a moral compass that he has been thinking a lot about recently. He finds himself fascinated by this little golden object because it symbolises the evolution of his morals.

“Can I keep this?” he asks Hannibal.

Hannibal nods with a warm smile, and Will slides the compass into his pocket. It feels fitting that he takes it with him to wherever they end up spending the rest of their life; a physical symbol of the journey they have taken together and one they have lying ahead.

They finish packing up the office in the next half an hour and move to stand by the window, enjoying the peaceful Baltimore scenery for perhaps the last time ever.

“I’d like to take you to Florence,” Hannibal says. “You’ve shown me New Orleans, the place of your beginning. Now I’d like to show you the city of *my* beginning.”

“I’d like that. But we can’t settle there,” Will responds, his brow furrowing. “I’m going to need to come back here a few times to kill more law evaders, to hide the connection between me leaving and the Vigilante murders stopping.”

He figures that because the Ripper kills in small sounders with up to a year between them, Hannibal will have disappeared from the country long before people start to realise that the Ripper has stopped killing. Once again, Will is impressed by his partner’s cleverness. It is something he tries to emulate and incorporate into his plans too.

“I see that you have considered every little detail of your design, and it is marvellous. Would you allow me to suggest a small addition?” Hannibal asks, his expression thoughtful.

Will nods and meets his eyes. “Sure.”

“You are a changed man, starting a new chapter in your life. There is no need for you to return to the place that made you.”

“What are you suggesting?” Will queries.

“Perhaps, it’s time to retire the Virginia Vigilante.”

Will keeps looking at him with a puzzled expression, not quite sure yet what the man is alluding to.

“What if I told you that the imaginary attacker we described to Jack in our witness accounts is a real person?” Hannibal elaborates.

Will’s eyes widen.

“You had... someone specific in mind. This whole time”, he deduces, speaking slowly as realisation dawns on him, “Before I even did what I did to Penelope…”

Hannibal looks at him with a fond expression on his face; something that exudes adoration and pride. “I knew you were always going to do it.”

And deep inside, Will realises he always knew too.

Even if he wanted to, he could not find it in himself to be upset at Hannibal’s plan to frame somebody else, allowing Will to leave everything behind without worrying about being caught. The thing is, doing something like that sounds wrong, but does not necessarily *feel* wrong.

He does write his own moral code after all.

“We can close that chapter of your life. But only with your permission,” Hannibal says, glancing at Will with his curious eyes.

Will lowers his gaze and takes a moment to think about it.

They have come a long way since they first met. Many things have changed. Will changed Hannibal, and Hannibal changed Will. Their relationship has evolved from strictly professional relations to a deep, unbreakable romantic bond. In the process, Hannibal transformed from a man who thought he was doomed to be lonely and not understood by anyone into having a companion that shares his worldview. And Will evolved from someone who hid his dark desires in the back corner of his soul into a man that grew to understand that to attain inner harmony, he must embrace those desires.

So, Will does exactly that. He embraces his desires to the fullest.

He takes Hannibal's hand into his own. "You have my permission."

They continue holding hands as they walk out of Hannibal's office, leaving behind the very room where it all began. Will's free fingers find the compass in his pocket again.

A souvenir to remember his origins by. A trophy to celebrate who he has become.

The compass needle sways a little before settling to point north, like it is supposed to. No matter what happens to a traveller during a journey, the compass always finds the right direction. Will smiles, realising that perhaps, he is the same. Now that he knows his true north and has decided to follow it for the rest of his life, he knows he will never get lost again.

Chapter End Notes

It's doneeeeee! I started writing this fic in September and now, after 4 months, it's finally done! Thank you for sticking with me for this ride, I appreciate every kudos and comment left on my work ❤❤❤

If you liked this fic, feel free to check out my other ones. I've got a fic All Greeks Would Die about Will and Hannibal finding their way back to each other after being separated after the fall. Or if you want more serial killer Will, check out Trade Secrets!

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